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Dislodging Patriarchy: The Poetry of Kamala Das

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Abstract

In the ever changing and ever evolving reality of life, the status of woman all over the world and particularly in the Indian continent has undergone rapid and phenomenal change. Women's past has been a pathetic one, governed and dictated by male standards. Inching towards future, she has succeeded to a great extent, though not fully, to break the fetters of her servility and oppression and prove her worth to the world. The world has started witnessing their value competence.

Keywords- Gender Bias, Masculine, Sexism, Patriarchy, Phallogocentrism, Servility

Feminism initially studied 'gender as a system of cultural signs on meaning assigned to sexually dimorphic bodies, but over the years it turned to see gender as a basic binary opposition man/woman, male/female, masculine/feminism, and in the past few decades it acquired the political dimension about who oppresses whom. Thus, feminism as a movement against sexism turned out to be reverse sexism, thereby developing an attitude of revenge towards the male domination. The post independence women poets of India writing in English exhibit signs of feminist reprisal against the long existing patriarchal set-up. They do voice their dissatisfaction, bitterness and frustration. They show certain signs of reaction. They have tried to create a space for their voice. The change is first not reflected in the thematic concerns, but as well in the diction, expression and style of the new generation of women poets.

Elaine Showalter's "Anthropological Intersecting Circle" discusses how earlier only men's area were active as he dominated in real life ('Phallogocentrism') as well as in literature ('Phallogocentrism'), whereas, woman were mute, and even when they wrote, about the common area, about love, nature, myths and legends, children, food, economy etc., though with an added advantage of feminine sensibility as in case of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. But with Kamala Das, Eunice De Souza, Imtiaz Dharkar, Gauri Deshpande and Mamta Kalia,

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poetry made a departure from the early romanticism and became much more realistic, frank, bold, candid, matter of fact, making use of free, experimental verse. In fact, twentieth century witnessed a plethora of women poets all over the world articulating their pain and pleasure as never before. Education transferred the pen from the horse, mouth. It resulted in the reversal of centre–periphery relationship. In post-colonial terms we may say that just as post-colonialism rejects Eurocentric version of universalism (that what Europeans thought was universal), feminists reject ‘Phallogocentric’ version of Universalism (that what men thought was universal) Their writings constitute a discourse of subversion that tends to subvert the patriarchal notions governing their lives. As a result of this change of attitude we have the emergence of ‘gyno’ poems that do not hesitate to deal with the taboo subject katrik views also confirms this fact:

Women writers’ stances, particularly with regard to glorifying/denigrating traditions, vary as dictated by their own class backgrounds, levels of education, political awareness and commitment, and their search for alternatives to existing levels of oppression often inscribed within the most revered traditions. Their texts deal with, and often challenge, their dual oppression – patriarchy that preceded and continues after colonialism and that inscribes the concepts of womanhood, motherhood.... (P. 257)

Marriage for these poets becomes a sort of infringement on freedom creating a crisis identity. They challenge the phallogocentric idea of society. At a deeper level, their poetry seeks to declare through their writings that for a woman writer what she has written was not something totally unexpected. Their writings necessitate a feminist reading. Their ability to depict, not only as a male but also as a female situations, characters and dilemmas straight out of everyday dogmatic life particularly her own needs to be recognized. Marriage suggest numerous writers, does not guarantee safety of home or a clear identity for the women. Many women writers in India, for instance, emphasize that marriage might indeed be detrimental to the woman’s identity (except in so far as it bestows the identity of the self-sacrificing, unselfish constantly slaving woman-of the house) Marriage makes unreasonable demands on the woman, and offers little in return. In the Hindu context, notions of chastity, service to the husband, and motherhood work towards an erasure of the woman’s needs, desired, and even identity. She subsumes her identity under that of family’s Adrienne Rich in her brilliant analysis of motherhood writes to have been and reared a child is to have done that thing which patriarchy joins with physiology to render into the definition of femaleness’ Rigid Codes of ‘appropriate’ behavior circumscribe her. Governed by the regulating framework of self sacrifice, the woman puts up with several miseries and abuses within marriage. The ways in which a woman is controlled by the institution of marriage becomes a central theme for many writers. The wife who is socially and financially more successful is subject to constant abuse by her husband. Marriage signals the end of independence – if they were ever

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independent in their father's home. Patriarchy deprives her of free movement a choice. What family and domestic life offer and woman is an uncertain and unsure existence.

In this context R.W. Connell's views are worth quoting here:

Men ... enjoy patriarchal power, but accept it as if it were given to them by an external force, by nature or convention or even by women themselves, rather by on active social subordination of women going on here and now. (P 125)

Kamala Das is, however, regarded as a greater champion of freedom for women. The publication of her autobiography, 'My Story' (1976), has also encouraged readers to relate her poems to her life her poems present the persona as an unhappy woman, unfortunate wife and reluctant nymphomaniac. In 'My Story', she talks of highly regimented atmosphere in which she grew because of excessive parental control. Her parents:

... considered us mere puppets, moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personality too that were developing independently, like sturdy shoots of the banyan growing out of crevices in the walls of ancient fortress. (P82)

Kamala Das fights "fierce battle against patriarchy pinpointing it to be the cause of her crisis as a woman. What she demands is like what Helen Cixons talks about "Female experience" which happens to be repressed and needs a free expression she is much more than merely a freak, and certainly full of anger when she hits out the male domination. Iyengar observed that she "has a fiercely feminine (female) sensibility that dare without inhibitions to actuate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world. She is unlike conventional Indian Women. As Mithilesh K. Pandey says, "Armed with Indian austerity, Kamala Das has manifested her own realization of life's predicament as a woman in her poems with almost sincerity..."

What is significant about Kamala Das is that her discontent is healthy. She has thus asserted herself in larger than private context, and she has discovered the means to release the energy of her hidden anger by creating powerful literature. She is constantly aware of her patriarchal tradition and this awareness embodies her anguish as well as her rebellion. Her anguish stems from her perception of the vast dividing chasm between the legitimate places of the Nair women as sanctioned by a historical tradition, and the actual subaltern status given to them by a feudal patriarchy. This constitutes the poet's agony and therefore she cannot choose to be one of those women who endure injustice for the sake of survival. Her mode of survival is by keeping her identity intact. The attitude of the poet in "An Introduction" and "Spoiling the Name" in fact in most of her poems is conspicuously proactive as opposed to the reactive attitude of mainstream feminists. It is this proactive position of Das that makes her a Third World Feminist.

'The Stone Age' which not only spurns the advances of her husband towards her but also spits out in utter disgust her venom at him:

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Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind,
Old fat spider, weaving web of bewilderment,
Be kind, you turn me into a bird of stone, a granite
Dove...

(The Stone Age)

These lines suggest among other things, the poem is also about the colonization of the woman's mind by patriarchy. Here is a subtle analysis of the male physiology made with an aversion. This is most evident in Das' relationship with her husband and makes her complain in her poem 'The Freaks':

He talks, turning a sun – stained
Cheek to me, his mouth a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam, his right
Hand on my knee...
--- Can't this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers?

(The Freaks)

She is not in a mood to spare her husband so easily. She presents physiological details with rather startling candour with a concealed postcolonial agenda to expose patriarchal expectations about woman as quintessence of physicality. "The Looking Glass" is the finest example to confirm this view about her. Not only this, she seems to equalize herself with the male counterparts even if it may look startling:

... It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, mid night, in hotels of strange towns.
It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
And then feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat
I am sinner, I am saint, I am the beloved and the
Betrayed

So far, this profuse use of 'I' was an exclusive, arrogant privilege of men, now for the first time a perceptive change has come to Indian Poetry when a woman poet has the audacity to enter the male preserve. No matter her pure love degenerates into unwarranted lust. No matter if her emotional urges are left unquenched. Turning more radical making patriarchal God the Centre of its critique, we love lines from the poem "Glass" where we find a whore speaking:

I enter other's

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Lives, and
Make of every trap of lust
A temporary house

(Glass)

She is not prepared to put up with this lot of nature any more she would not mind losing herself in the arms of other man. If her partner can do so, why can't she? Though her quest resulted only in a narcissistic union.

"The Conflagration" belongs to the group of poems that give voice to the woman's spirit of rebellion against male domination and ego. There is a desire to extricate from this "Soul Killing" subjugation:

Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man? It is time again to come alive
A world extend a Pot beyond his
Six foot frame.

(The Conflagration)

This poem enables us to witness the transition from passivity to rebellion. In her poems, she examines "the psychic disintegration which results, when self rejects established norms." The psychological trauma, frustrations and the resultant quest for identity and wholeness as a result of the revolt against male-dominated society.

Poem after poem she articulates her intense desire of escaping from his clutches and attaining freedom:

I shall some day leave, leave this cocoon
You build around me with morning tea,
- - -
I shall some day take
Wings, fly around, as often petals,
Do when free in air ...

("I Shall Some Day")

She is not the one who takes her subjugation as a grant rather feels guilty to have done so. The woman in her is not ready to bear the whip marks of hegemonic patriarchal culture-

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.

(The old Playhouse and Other Poems)

In most of her poems, every attempt by patriarchy to marginalize her is rendered ineffective by her persistent refusal to change her ways. She is conscious of the fact that

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hegemonic patriarchy has kept women away from the gambit of politics and it does not expect them to 'know' politics. Her very act of writing almost breaks the set rules and norms of the status quo. Her writings in general and her poetry in particular can be seen as a critique of the hegemonic and oppressive patriarchal structures of power, antecedent to a profound sense of alienation in her work. Das' "An Introduction" is a brilliant example of how patriarchy tries to fit her into the traditional mould:

Dress in saree, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in, oh,
Belong, cried the categories.
- - -
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better
Still, be Madhavikutty.

(An Introduction)

This shows how patriarchy tries to dictate terms to her but she rejects all categories. In fact, in an act of defiance, she goes to the extent of denying her womanliness that patriarchy turns into a curse.

She finds her self-esteem bruised and her very soul flagellated by patriarchy. She begins to find her woman body' repulsive but she cannot discard it, she cannot change it so she decides to change her appearance and abandon sari in favour of shirt and trousers, signifying convention and rebellion respectively:

Then ... I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness ...

(An Introduction)

She expresses her inability to the behavioural patterns expected in a tradition ridden family. The poet personal breaks away from the traditional role of a woman. Here the subjective. 'I' become the objective 'I' I and since the women do share many common experiences, no one but a woman can better understand a woman. Her poetry truly fulfills what Virginia Woolf says, "The Woman writer must make her own sentence, altering and adapting the current sentence until she writes one that takes a natural shape of her thoughts."

It, at time absolves the distance between the eternal reality and that of her inner landscape making it a dynamic art form, full of life an equation or "objective correlative" to use Eliot's phrase, of their psychological as well as lived reality that encompasses within it folds their dreams, memories, anxieties, joys and reflections and accordingly, at times becomes chiselled or compassionate or even desperate. Both her approach to love and her account of it are anti-elegant and anti-stylish and thus, address the women, world-wide with a universal note.

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The portrait of the woman persona that emerges out her poems is a complex one. It is so partly because Kamala Das reveals her feminine sensibility in diverse role such as wife, beloved, daughter, sister, granddaughter, mother, mistress and even nymphomaniac Kohli has his opinion:

Kamala Das has more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual freedom and identity... (P29)

Thus, Kamala Das a poet is remarkable because she reveals feelings of anxiety, alienation, meaninglessness, futility, sense of isolation, fragmented self and loss of identity. Her poetry originates from self which functions like a poetic nucleus. She feels exploited and cheated by the civilization of which she is a part. Kamala Das, therefore, has expressed her emotions freely through her poems making herself controversial and at the same time world famous. Her writings of power are oppressive, corrosive and discriminatory. Her views on gender are more objective than those of her western counterparts. What one encounters in Das is an oriental dialectics of the body and the soul. In her realization of the part, she is aware of the thin dividing line between decolonization and revivalism; between justice to women and injustice to men, between feminism and misanthropism. Her role in the Indianization of English, her commitments to the marginalized and the overall widening of her vision of life and art, grant Das a significant place in the topical context of postcolonial feminism.

On mental and emotional plane, she had complete compatibility with her spouse and all that was possible in a situation like hers was to register her protest that way only. Incidentally, Iqbal Kaur looks for 'a new kind of morality' in it:

...Kamala Das did display tremendous courage in revolting against the sexual colonialism and providing hope and confidence to young woman that they can refuse and reject victim positions, that they can frustrate the sexist culture's efforts to exploit, passivise and marginalize woman. (Iqbal Kaur)

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