

Kamala Das A Prominent Feminist Writer

Abstract

Feminist English Literature is a spectrum of many colours and shades-soft Prominent and strident. The voices emanating therefore vary from the traditional but conscious of-their selves to exclusively self-seeking with a seeming vengeance. The conventional modes in Indian English poetry have been unable to convey reality; rather they have only glossed it over. Kamala Das confronts reality in its brutal and ugliest forms. Her poetic techniques and language coalesce with her mood and with her experience.

Keywords: Feminist, Examination, Freedom Struggle

Introduction

Feminist Literature in English is certainly not a recent innovation. It has been there ever since perspectives on life were recorded in the medium of literature, though it certainly has come to its own of late of recent origin again is the feminist perception of literature. Feminist criticism in its broadest implication has three distinct subdivisions, each with its own adherents. The first two are well defined and frequently practiced without raising any ideological outrage. These are : The examination and analysis of the portrayal of women characters by themselves or in relationship with their male counterparts, and the appreciation of female authors. What is noteworthy is the fact that in the last few years these commonly accepted critical practices have been overhauled to accommodate the possibility of exclusively feminist perceptions of human relationships. Uma Vasudevan's Shreya of Sonagarh makes the reader aware of this new found angle of perception. The third direction is that of the so called 'Prescriptive criticism' that attempts to set standards for literature that is 'good' from the feminist perspective.

Aim of the Study

Feminism in the Indian context is a by product of the Western Liberalism in general and feminist thought in particular. The indigenous contributing factors have been the legacy of equality of sexes inherited from the freedom struggle, constitutional rights of women, spread of education and the consequent new awareness among women.

In this context Ms. Kamala Das has mostly been assessed as a writer in the genre of confessional poetry. She has been ranked with such poetesses of dissatisfaction and discontent as Sylvia Plath and Am Sexton, though the comparison is seen by many as undeserving.

There are essentially two sides to Ms. Das's poetry; one is that which is extraordinarily centred around her own self, probing the malaise an morbidity that seem to clamp on her poetic vision. Over the years, it is this side that has been turned to our view, and she has been dismissed and rated accordingly.

Why not leave

Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,

Every one of you? Why not let me speak in

Any language I like?

Things that came from her pen was something new, as no woman writer had ever before written with such power and honesty. The other side emerges from this, or seen from another angle, is a dimension of it. Her poetry constitutes not just a compelling expression of personal experiences and a forceful subjective voice, but more importantly, a phenomenon unlike any other in Indian English poetry. She is the first woman poet to crack the mould, and establish an attitude an view point the Indian readers were quite unfamiliar with.

I wore a shirt and my Brother's trousers,

Cut y hair short and ignored My womanliness.

Readers whose tastes an expectations were formed by compositions like 'Morning Serenade', 'Our Casuarina Tree', 'The Queen's Rival', 'Caprice', 'The Lady of the Night' and such like, were shocked and staggered by what Kamala Das wrote. It was so unconventional, so hurtfully new, so



Mala Srivastava

Assistant Professor,
Deptt.of English,
K.N. Govt. P.G. College,
Gyanpur, Bhadohi

outrageously anti-traditional. What the general readers reacted to immediately was the bold and frank confessional tone she wrote in and broad imagery seeking to convey the hurts and humiliations she received in her personal life. It is true the personal voice is very strong in her, and from one point of view it provides a very limited scope. However, this voice is so strong that it extends beyond the personal world of anguished feelings and assumes wider significance.

I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours,
No aches which are not yours,
I too call myself I

There is a strange power in the way she conveys meaning through concrete imagery which have pictorial vividness, tactile immediacy, and auditory impact. The areas of experience these images reveal have long lain submerged; it required unusual courage to bring them to light. A profoundly restless spirit fired by the "passional force", to use D.H. Lawrence's expression, that originates in a mind that sees and hears and is aware of a disharmonious life, of the hurt inflicted by coercive subjugation and complete obliteration of the self, needed a new idiom, a new repertoire of images and symbols and a new poetic approach, the conventional being woefully inadequate. One easily discerns ruggedness in her metre, savagery in her images, a complete denial of all the Toru Dutt- Sarojini Naidu- Nilima Devi tradition stood for.

She was joined after a few hesitations by Mamta Kalia, Eunice de Souza Margaret Chatterjee, Sunita Namjoshi, Gauri Deshpande and a whole generation of younger poetesses to establish an images of woman totally unencumbered by the conventional falsifying colours. This was not a personal matter but a whole generation's pangs of birth, not an individualistic attitudinizing but a painful transformation coming over feminine consciousness.

"To fight for the dignity and true emancipation of women is the most difficult task especially because it involves values and attitudes that are deep-rooted not only in the minds of men but also in the consciousness of women ... The period of transition manifests contradictory patterns, the subjugation and the emergence of new forms of bondage and subjugation in the new era of dominance of money and market..... The concept of freedom of women in practice is grossly vulgarized throwing up extremely grotesque and distorted forms of 'freedom' in a "transitional society combining the worst of both worlds".

Kamala Das's poetry embodies agonies of women emerging from that state of subjugation and bondage, and seeking to establish their identity and the self. Obviously, this is not an easy and uncomplicated process, as this involves discarding a lot, adopting a defiant attitude and probing the bruised self that expresses itself in so many different moods ranging from despair and dejection to anger and bewildered

sense of rootlessness. This is best expressed through felt emotions in an intensely personalized idiom. It is easy enough to see in such a stance a dislocated mind suffering the nightmares of a shut-in life devastated and laid bare by a hyper-sexed, self-willed and schizophrenic woman. This is precisely what prevailing critical attitude to her poems highlights, which is not only lamentably lop-sided, but indicative of an alarmingly impoverished angle of critical outlook in Indian English Criticism. In a vein which issues from this dominant critical approach, her poems are seen as the expression of the pitiable plight of a defenseless woman who needs love consideration and sympathy and desires a loving husband, warmth and home.

Such an interpretation comes from a reluctance to give up the traditional mental attitude, for what is more heartwarming than the return of the defiant woman of the conventional age-old mould of the 'categorizers' It misses the basic point about her poetry; it is essentially a poetry of protest, of defiance and of emphatic assertion, all other moods ranging from weak feminine sense of helplessness and submission, to a restless search for happiness and shelter are different expressions of this basic Promethean spirit which is eager to break the rusted shackles and have its voice heard.

As the convict studies
His prison's geography
I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love,
For I must someday find
An escape from its snare

Whether she explores her sexual experiences and encounters or the seamy side of public life, cities, dwellings, and streets – there can always be noted the defiant, ironical tone in her poetry. No other Indian English poet employed irony to such devastating effect before Kamala Das – it is caustic, it is profoundly demolishing. It evokes both pity and anger, sympathy and ire. Kamala Das's poetry presents Indian woman in a way that has outraged the usual male sense of decency and decorum. Kamala Das inaugurates a new age for woman poets by doing so, an age seeking to forge new idiom, a new medium and newer modes of address, constituting a total rejection of the newer modes of address, constituting a total rejection of the conventional modes of poetic expression of the dominant culture. The shock generated by this is something resembling the shock created by the experimental poets of the 1920s (Hulme, Pound and Eliot) who decide that the time had come to liberate English poetry from the Georgian decadence and rejuvenate it. Though no such high claims can be made for Kamala Das, her importance as an inaugurator of a new poetic awareness for Indian woman poets is an established fact. As a critic has observed, "She deals with the conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male-oriented universe. Her poetry is the acknowledgement and celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman."

Her medium is a passionate inflamed assertion of that being which has remained mute, suppressed and battered through nameless centuries.

"The central problem in poetry is always the problem of reality, less on the social and more on the psycho-spiritual plain. The existential conditions impinge intensely on the female psyche. The acceptance or rejection, denial or disapproval at the emotional level, whether in love or death creates in her inner storm, a mutiny within", says Elizabeth Smart.

When Kamala Das writes,
Of what does the burning mouth Of sun, burning
in today's
Sky remind me..... Oh, yes, his
Mouth and his limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
Out for me.....

She is not celebrating unbridled sensuality, but projecting the stereotype of a wronged woman and at once asserting the need to establish her voice and identity. As someone observed, we see in her "the calm centre of the storm, the triumphant surge of affirmative projection that comes with a clear perception of despair by an energetically creative spirit".

Those who naively condemn her for her unpretentious frankness and bold portrayal of the living fabric of the passional man-woman relationship deface and distorted by aberrations coming from socially – culturally determined attitudes, fail to see the basic force and drift of her poetry. Alicia Ostriker, a contemporary critic says:

"The belief that true poetry is genderless – which is a disguised form of believing that true poetry is masculine-means that we have not learned to see women poets Generically, to recognize the tradition they belong to.....

With Kamala Das it is essentially a matter of attuning our critical vision to "the hidden vistas" of her

inner world which has so much to offer to our perturbed, questioning minds. For her poetry is not "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality". As she say in My Story "A poet's raw material is not clay or stone; it is her personality. I could not escape from personality". And again,

"One's real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one who has decided to travel inwards, will realize that his route has no end."

Conclusion

Feminism is a rapidly developing critical ideology of great promise. It has evolved into a philosophy encompassing diverse fields of human activity in society. The present anthology provides a broad spectrum on Feminist English Literature with in-depth analysis of the works of Kamala Das.

References

1. *The Alien in Contemporary American Women's Poetry*- Margaret Dickie/*Contemporary Literature/ Wisconsin University/XXVIII*, 3, 1987.
2. *Women in Indian Society*, ed., Rehana Ghadially, Sage Pub., 1988.
3. *Kamala Das by Devendra Kohli*, New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1974.
4. Quoted by Manorma B. Trikha in 'Contemporary Canadian Poetry by women: a Cosmos of Miscellany', *Meerut Journal of Comparative Literature and Language*, special no. *Canadian studies – Vol. V, No. 1*, 1992
5. *Kamala Das: Davendra Kohli*, N.D.: Arnold-Heinemann, 1974.
6. "Skating the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America", *Contemporary Literature, Wisconsin University*, 29.2, Summer 1988.
7. *Selected Essays*, T.S. Eliot, Penguin, London.
8. *My Story*, by Kamala Das