

“An introduction” and “Stone Age” – A Feminist approach to Kamala Das’ Poems.

Deepasree Das Sarkar

Associate Professor & H. O. D Department of English Margherita College, PO – Margherita, Assam

Abstract: *Kamala Das belongs to the first generation of modern English poets who evolved a new poetics for themselves and made a new start both in theme and technique around 1960's. The first phase of Indo-Anglican poetry ended in 1950's. To the poets of this period the spirit of modernism was almost alien. Their main pre-occupation was the spirit of nationalism and the war of independence, partition of country. It was only in the sixties that things began to take a new dimension where a new generation of young poets took control of the Indo-Anglican poetic realm. Kamala Das is one of the most powerful voices of this post-colonial era. In Kamala Das's poetry we find the best expression of feminine sensibility, its suppression in a male dominated society. So her poetry is confessional and auto-biographical to a great extent, but at times she universalizes what is personal. This research paper would unfold how she rebels against the conventional restraints of society which are meant to exploit women in this man made world. “An Introduction” and “Stone Age” are two of her best known poems where she is intensely conscious of herself as woman, and through writing about the self she challenges the accepted notions of the female and redraft general opinion of the feminine mystique.*

Key Words: *Feminist, Sexuality, Rebel, Patriarchy, Post-Colonial Study.*

I. Introduction

Kamala Das is the first Hindu woman to write honestly about sexual feelings and her bodily needs and was sort listed in 1984 for the Nobel Prize in Literature along with Marguerite Yourcenar, Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer. She occupies a unique place among Indian English poets. She introduced a new idiom, a genre of her own, a novel approach and an altogether new sensibility. She gathered courage through her wistfulness to assert herself and write poetry, which became an expression of revolt against deep rooted malaise prevalent in a patriarchal society. Feminist consciousness and language found an exponent of sensuality and spirituality in Kamala Das, who unmindful of brickbats and accolades, carried on untiringly creating poems of abiding charm, enduring empathy and inconceivable audacity. She was not an exhibitionist. She represents the essential every woman, their desires and anguish, giving voice to the universally voiceless women. In this venture Kamala Das carried on her mission undaunted, inviting controversies now and then till the point of her death. This paper would try to focus on her well known two poems” AN INTRODUCTION AND STONE AGE”, related to women psyche from childhood, as a wife, as lover, a voice against exploitation, each role constitutes different demands and a different perspective on the people around her. Such a poetic treatment belongs to the history of the recent years in which there has been a heightening of interest in the work and achievement of women in particular.

Women's poetry in India has a distinct landmark and tradition of its own right from the original tribal songs of its original inhabitants, the pali songs of Buddhist nuns of the 6th Century B. C., the Sangam poets of Tamil like Andal and Auvaiyar, the devotional poets of the middle ages like Mirabai, Ratna Bai, Jana Bai, Aatukri Mollw and Akkamahadevi, Muddupalani, Bahinabai, Mahlaq Bai Chanda and Sanoiya Hosannamma of 17th and 18th Centuries and reached upto Kamala Das's mother Balamoni Amma. Kamala Das's poetry has her autobiography written into it. ¹ She is not any women or the incarnation of 'essential womanhood' if at all there in one; She is an Indian poet, writing in English when Indian poetry in English is breaking free from the rhetorical and romantic tradition. Kamala's much discussed poem “An Introduction” is a comprehensive articulation of the different individual and social components that go into the making of this sub genre.

First appeared in “Summer in Calcutta” and the in “The Old Playhouse and other poems”, An Introduction is one of the best poems ever written by Kamala Das. Here we should note that she is the inheritor of many traditions, the regional cultural traditions of Kerala and the pan-Indian tradition: and within the regional tradition she has a specifically matrilineal background provided by her caste, and a specific provincial background offered by Malabar Coast when she was born and spent her early childhood. She bears the fruit of two poetic traditions, that of Malayalam whose roots go back into the ancient Tamil Sangam Poetry and medieval folklore, and another one is Indian English poetry beginning with Henri Derozio and Toru Dutt. She herself has two poets in her family, Balamoni Amma her mother and Nalapat Narayan Menon, her maternal uncle. As a small school going child she felt tortured by the 'subtle saddism' of her teachers and house maids. She didn't have a university degree although she was a bilingual writer, Malayalam and English.

³ An Introduction is itself a polyphonic text with several of the poet’s voices seeking articulation in a single verbal construct. The opening statement, “I do not know Politics” has an ambiguous tone that portrays women’s marginalized position in society. Outwardly it is a confession of ignorance, but it also conceals an irony that the society does not expect a woman to deal in politics. She is never the master in politics but just a victim of it and hence her knowledge of the names who are in power have no impact of her personal life.

Then she brings into account more specifically showing nationality, complexion, place of birth and the language known, an ironic filling up of an ungiven form. The “language she dreams in” again is ambiguous enough to warrant many interpretations: It could be that of imagination, woman’s language, English or Malayalam and many more. She also justifies her choice of English as the medium of expression as she believes that she has the right to use it with her own angularities and eccentricities, her human joys and longing. It is the voice of her instincts as is the lion’s roar and the crow’s cawing. She recalls the unconscious terrors of her childhood from trees, monsoon clouds and the rains. Speaking of adolescence her female body inscribes itself on the text and she remembers too her first encounter with masculine violence that belongs to the same frightening world of trees in the storm and the muttering of the funeral pyre. Reference to the swelling limbs, growing hairs, the pitiful weight of breasts and womb and the sad woman body “emphasize the corporal ground of woman’s experience female physicality often identified with female textuality. It has been said that women suffer cultural scripts in their bodies and women writers are like the mythic woman warrior who went into battle scarred by the then blades which her parents literary used to write fine lines of script on her body. The women cannot change her body, so the poet changes her dress and tries to initiate men. But the voices of tradition would force her back into sarees, the saree becomes a sign of convention here. She is pushed back in her expected gender roles: wife, cook, embroiderer, quarreler with servants: the gender role also become a class role. The elders fill her world with taboos asking her to be her parents’ Amy, her friends’ Kamala or her reader’s Madhabikutty (her pen name in Malayalam). Every deviation from this fixed rule is looked upon as perversion or mental illness. Her humiliated self begs for real love, the nature similes of the hasty river and the waiting ocean re-emphasize the element of instinct that drives the woman in her. The many ontological dimensions of her being – lover’s darling, drinker of the city nights, one who makes love, feel shame, sinner, saint, beloved, betrayed – are tied together at the end of the poem where the poet’s ego dissolves in others as soon as it is asserted. If the poet finds the male ego, “tightly packed like the sword in its sheath”, violent, arrogant and exclusive, she finds her identity to be a moment of deference before a final dissolution in others as she finds that her joys and aches are the same as those of her readers and common women.

Prof. K. R. S. Iyenger characterizes this poem as confessional. And Devindra Kohli calls it “a candid and witty piece of self-revelation.” The poem encompasses the whole of Das’s poetic ‘journey including the obvious post-colonial agenda. It raises the key post-colonial feminist question of identity of a woman of substance who also happens to be a poet. It voices her firm refusal to abandon English as an alien tongue and, on behalf of those choosing to use this language as a poetic medium, she identifies it as a vital and inseparable component of the Indian Identity.

The poem “Stone Age” belongs to Kamala Das’s third volume of poetry, “The Old Playhouse and other Poems” (1973). The entire poem is in the form of a monologue from the mouth of a woman who finds neither love nor happiness in her relationship with her husband. Like other poems of Das this poem also deals with the theme of the failure of conjugal relationship. It also shows how step by step the wife develops illicit relationship in the hope of finding proper love but ultimately landed into a barren loveless land.

The poem can easily be divided into two distinct parts. The first part shows the treatment that the woman persona receives from her husband. He treats her not as a human being but merely as an object for beautification placed in some corner of the house. Then she becomes a stone object – a bird or stone or a granite dove. Her husband was very indifferent towards her. Instead of love she started to beg kindness from him. The image of a fat spider settled in the mind of the wife highlights the sinister nature of man. In turn, it also shows that his love is like the web of a spider that words as a trap for its victim and helps the spider to suck up the vitality from its victim and make it lifeless. This is a process that makes her completely dependent on the wish of the man. He pays little heed to her comforts and discomforts and even disturbs the serenity of her mind with his beastly behaviour.

“Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilder. Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, A granite dove.....”

Thus dissatisfied in married life, the woman is unconsciously drawn towards illicit relationship in search of pure and true love. This desire is so strong that it makes the pull of traditional in her ineffective, these instincts are to be kept hidden from public eyes like gutters beneath clean cities. Behind the back of her husband, she discovers her own ways of finding love. She goes to her secret rendezvous and tries to find love outside marriage. Curious neighbours peep on her activities as she comes and goes in her blue car. The repetitive use of blue colour indicates the innocent nature of her adventures. The woman personally efforts to find out true love almost always bring her sordid experiences of physical relationship. The man she goes to find

relief from the bitter experience of marital relationship, seems to be a lion to her for his fierce nature as during sexual intercourse. She remembers the taste of his moth, as well as the brutal way of his love making. Such experience of love is something different from the indifference she received from her husband. The moments of such love relationships are a kind of blinder to her. But this experience of love turns out to be of very short duration and she knows that she has to pay the price for them. In her autobiography “My Story” Das says “In the orbit of illicit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence.” All her quests for true love end in disasters of sexual intercourse which brings only sorrow and fatigue.

..... Ask me, everybody ask me
What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion,
A libertine, ask me the flavor of his
Mouth ask me why his land sways like a hooded snake
Before it, claps my pubis. Ask me why like
A great tree, felled, he slumps against my breast,
And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is
Shorten, still, ask me what is bliss and what its price.....

As a revolutionary writer Kamala Das always stands apart and has carved a niche of herself. In her writings the Indian first viewed the desire, the sexuality that as a woman she feels and how audaciously she proclaims it. Her poetry is the genuine outburst of her spasmodic force. It is altogether a novel arena of literature where being a woman she freely writes about her body, her instinct, her possessions, her lust which she feels her men. It is a new kind of women born in Indian context a renaissance curvature of history which borders on “The Gita’s” statement given by Krishna that nature in itself is wayward, boisterous and chaotic. Krishna says the world would be destroyed within a minute if He does not control it. Kamala Das is revolting precisely against such male Chauvinism which is the will to dominate Das wants to live her life as a woman of flesh and blood, not as traditionally ideal Indian women like “Sita” or “Meera”. She wants to love a man who could also have the same kind of passion and sexual urgency that she has for him. This is not a crime and she argues on behalf of it strongly. Since K. Das did not find anyone in her life, she changed religion, went to different male partners but her quest remained unfulfilled. Instead of permanency of love, she has encountered the bareness of soulless lustfulness in relationships. She has had to make a fresh start again. The poetry of K. Das has created a new kind of space in Indian English poetic tradition. Specially from the point of view of her use of language, words and bold expression. Due to the impact of social condition and her location in the patriarchal realm K. Das at times feels guilty. This is the moment when her conscious mind comes to play, bringing her expressions to conform to the Law of the Father-the symbolic order / the phallic order of the land. However again by placing herself in the realm, she has used those limitations as a strategy to subvert the hegemonic control.

II. Conclusion

Kamala Das has been branded as a confessional poet. On the other hand she wants to generate a new role for the women in society and lend voice to the themes of loneliness and subaltern anguish. This paper tried to show how by the act of defining female space, she becomes a threat to the existing patriarchal discourse. This paper unfolded a new arena in the field of post colonial Indian English writing. Colonization is a facet of patriarchy. Patriarchy and colonization go hand in hand. Whites dominate the slaves and slaves dominate the women who are colonized. Therefore post colonial feminists say that women are doubly marginalized and colonized. Kamala Das was a woman and also a poet. Conventional studies have relegated women to BODY and MIND to men. However Kamala Das critiqued, mocked and subverted these representations by writing through her body and about her bodily needs. In fact her writings become a celebration of the women’s body through a typical writing of her own. She is very post colonial in the truest sense of the term as earlier poets had only written poems in praise of country, nature etc. But Das has turned inwards, towards the self and given voice to the otherwise suppressed women’s voice. This research article has focused on an altogether novel aspect of post colonial women writings in the Indian scenario and opens up a new field of studies for further research students.

Reference: -

- [1] Only the soul knows how to sing – selection from Kamala Das. – Transcending the Body – Preface by K. Sachidanandan. P. No. 11
- [2] Kamala Das and her Poetry – Edited by Dr. Joydeep Sarkar. P. No. 42.
- [3] Transcending the Body – K. Sachidanandan. P. No. 12-13.
- [4] My Story – K. Das.
- [5] The Old Playhouse and other Poems – K. Das
- [6] Feminist Literary Theory – edited by Ellen Rooney.
- [7] Kamala Das – The Indian Monroe – Feminist Perspective – Hongsha Phomrong.