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QUEST FOR SELF IN KAMALA DAS'S POETRY



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Abstract: Ours country is a country with patriarchal system in society. Man is the head of the family. He is the owner of its member too. Talking about female, she is the main sufferer of this so called patriarchal system. Man assumes himself as the owner of female's mind as well as body also. Her feminine self gets hurt. Her inner conflicts tore her completely. She craves for her 'self'. She wants that her identity must be recognized. Kamala Das, a poet, as a strong protestant gives voice to this inner-conflict. Her poems are not only her own, but they belong to every woman. This paper attempts a critical reading of 'Quest for Self' in Kamala Das's poetry.

Keywords: society, metaphysics, Literature, colonization.

INTRODUCTION

Who I am? What I am doing here? These questions are the questions that every person asks to itself once in his/her life. Philosophers are the head of this field of inquiry which is also related to metaphysics. But it doesn't mean that writers have no concern with the 'self'. But this is that type of subject which is inquired by many but result is founded to some only. Many saints, rishis and others have left their homes to find about their "self". Literature is a mirror to society. Thus it is also a topic of literature. Many writers and poets have written on 'Self'. This search is more obvious and direct in the poetry because poetry is related to the heart and it is the result of inner feelings.

Self-study is not only a theme in literature but it is very important in classroom learning also. Self-study method of learning is good for understanding the lesson with a bird's eye view. It also enhances a learner to be more curious to know about the matter. 'Study of self' is not a new topic but still it demands attention. Many Rishis, Sages had left their homes to know about their self. They visited many places to get knowledge about their identity and their reason of existence in this world.

The colonial period in India had been passed but still there is colonization and that is colonization of 'Woman' physically, mentally and emotionally. They are still under colonial rule. The difference is that the ruler is not any country or race but it is the same person whose better half is the oppressed. After getting Independence, woman is still under colonial rule. They are not free to do whatever they want. Although in the modern times scenario is changing but now a day the cases of rape and sexual exploitation are in limelight. The result of it is that woman is again moving backward instead of moving forward. They have craved for their identity and recognition of their self and existence and still their craving is continuous.

"The topic of the self has long been salient and feminist philosophy, for it is pivotal to questions about personhood, identity, the body and agency that feminism

must address. In some respects, Simon de Beauvoir's trenchant observation, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the other," sums up why the self is such an important issue for feminism. To be the other is to be the non-subject, the non-person, the non-agent- in short, the mere body. In law, in customary practice, and in cultural stereotypes, women's selfhood has been systematically subordinated, diminished and belittled, when it has not been outright denied. Since women have been cast as lesser forms of the masculine individual, the paradigm of the self that has gained ascendancy in U.S. popular culture and in Western philosophy is derived from the experience of the predominantly white and heterosexual, mostly economically advantaged men who have dominated the arts, literature, the media and scholarship. A woman has to play many roles in her life. She is a daughter, sister, wife, and mother. But behind these identities, her essential womanhood gets suppressed. A woman is not supposed to reveal her experiences as a woman. She is conditioned traditionally to hide and repress her own emotions and desires. She is not allowed to show her wishes. She is unable to speak as she is subordinated by the males. But poetry is a mode through which she can vomit her desires, her feelings and her quest for self. Even though it hurts the souls of the people around her, she can reveal the experiences from any other point of view; as a writer, she can question the male dominance. And ask about herself, about her presence and about her existence. Silence has been a weapon of woman. But whenever they split totally from their hearts, then they change this weapon in protest. The very instrument woman use is literature. Either prose or poetry, Literature is the only field to which women, over a long stretch of time, have made an indispensable contribution. Although the struggle they make for their voices to be made heard is an unending process but they are still conflicting for their existence and for their identity. The struggle of woman for their identity seems to be unending.

In the Patriarchal society the primary function of

women is creation: she must create a place of her own. Thus the work on creation has been started by female writers. Writing is a means of creating a place in the world. In writing the use of personal voice, the feelings, desires are means of self-assertion. It shows clearly that now woman wants to be identified. The writing of poems, novels about their selves inevitably break the set rules and norms of the society in which she lives. The search for a liberated self than the one imposed by society and male dominated culture begins with the change in thinking of women. Their changing attitude towards their identity, their self brings new era for woman. Their attitude of questioning to accept the norms established by male-dominated society helps to recognize their importance. And special thanks goes to the female poets and novelists who come forward with their writings at the sake of getting criticism from the society.

A.V.V.V Malleswaramma says about quest for identity, "Quest for identity is basic to the human world. With the decline of grandeur and dignity of human life in the post-world war era, the crisis has intensified. Man faces an unprecedented rootlessness, loneliness and alienation. His quest is to attain a personal view of life and world, which makes the life meaningful, and a sense of belonging to him. Literature comprises this process- the crisis of self, the quest and the succeeding discoveries. In the case of women it is a double quest- the quest for identity as women and as a human being. The quest for identity of the Indian women poets in English began with Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, and their poetry is an assertion of national identity. There is a drastic change in life concerns in the post-Independence period so life has become more complicated."² Quest for self is the crux of Kamala Das's poetry. Kamala Das is an Anglo-Indian poet as well as writer. Born in Malabar in 1934, she has credited many works. Her poetry is the voice of her inner soul. She is of the idea that feminine self is a mere toy in the hands of male. She declared man, a beast, an animal with carnal hunger and without emotions. Her poetry collection namely, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other poems* (1973) are her literary voyages in the form of poetry. In the process of self-search Kamala Das oscillates between her nostalgic past and nightmarish present. Past is a symbol of security, love and freedom and present stands for insecurity, pretensions and bondage of society. Her consciousness lies stretched between two poles; it is drawn towards the positive past but held back by the negative present. One emotion, however, that is common to both the states, is that of pain. On excavation she finds only:

Deep, deep pain
To be frank
I have failed.
(Composition)

Kamala Das through her poems with the theme of self has opened the area for other women. She talks very frankly and boldly on the areas which were previously forbidden. Her poems reflect the ignored emotions of woman. Her poems are the result of her inner conflict and she is completely successful to show the whole world that an

Indian woman could create a space for herself. The poetry of Kamala Das reveals not merely self expression but a means of self-exploration and self-assertion. The male dominated society doesn't think of woman as an individual. It doesn't take her as a human being. The subject in Kamala Das's poetry is always "woman" and the content is female experience whether it is the trauma of an unhappy marriage, surrender in sex, or disgust at the male domination. This should not be taken one woman's experience in which case it becomes a stray incidence of individual misfortune. In fact it applies to all Indian women. Because this is a value that is making understood to the woman who is going to her In-law's house after getting married. Even a girl is accused as the reason for the calamities of a family. She is told that her husband will be the writer of her fate now. Her husband is her everything and the woman idols her husband as God. The same idea is expressed by Shashi Deshpande in her novel "That Long Silence".

She says: "A husband is like a sheltering tree, without the tree you are dangerously unprotected...equally logically and vulnerable and so you have to keep the tree alive and flourishing, even if you have to water it with deceit and lives. This is too followed, equally logically..."³

Thus Indian society provides values to a woman who is getting to be married, for subordination. But Kamala Das is not a simple woman who accepts this notion without protesting it. In her poems she shows clearly that she has to create a place for herself in a public world. Thus she gives words to her experiences and her feelings that is related not only to herself but also to every woman. She clearly hints at the archetypal nature of her experience. Here, her feminine self speaks in the first person pronoun:

...I am every
Woman who seeks love.
(An Introduction)

In many of her poems we find the woman trying different ways to get out of institutional traps by throwing away the rigid restrictions of patriarchal hegemony to winds. Kamala Das in many of her poems writes about the brutal treatment done by her husband. She declares that her husband is a killer of her all desires and wishes. As a young wife she does all the house hold chores. Her husband makes her an object of sexual pleasure. There is colonization not in terms of social existence but also in terms of sexual domination. Man assumes himself as an owner of females' body and mind. Whereas woman keeps herself mute as she has no tongue to say something. The domination of man compels a woman to do only what is told to do by her husband. The dignity of woman, her self respect, her identity, emotions has no mean. Kamala Das criticizes the male-domination and wishes to shatter the traditional image of woman as a passive listener, she wants the woman must come out of their predefined roles and establish a new one for her. She wants to liberate the female from the conventions ridden patriarchal society. The woman in "The Old Play House" squarely blames her husband for the dehumanization she has suffered:

Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf.

Her identity was crushed by her husband's dominating nature. In the title piece of the third volume of her poetry, "The Old Playhouse" she shows the nature of lust and disillusionment. She explores the male personality as well as her own self which is totally broken due to patriarchal husband. There is a common saying that we are toys in the hands of God. He can use or play with us and our lives as per His wish. The same idea is focused by Das in her poem. She seems to be obsessed with the idea that feminine self is a mere toy in the unfeeling hands of the male. Thus she lodges a strong protest against the instinct of possessiveness incarnate in her husband:

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind,
but also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
pathways of sky.

Kamala wishes 'to fly', to attain freedom, but her cruel husband suppresses her. Her ego self has declared man nothing more than a beast. Her husband not only annihilated her identity and individuality but also exploits her tender physical self and destroys her mind. When a person is dominating another for a long time, the bearer bears that suppression up to that when she has her last bearing power. But when the power expires, there is a loud voice and that comes from the bottom of the broken heart. And sometimes that very moment becomes the great weapon. Woman always avoids struggle, but when the suppression of the self crosses its limits, she wants to expose her feelings. Then she fights her own battle, because the female seeks her own identity. Kamala Das is a prolific poet as well as a writer. Her poetry has manifold themes. But the two main themes are love and the woman's identity through which comes the woman's voice. Regarding Kamala Das's poems, a critic Prabhat Kumar asks:

"What is a woman? A basic question that every woman writer has to face. Kamala speaks of the woman's identity in many of her poems. She writes of roles and moulds the society expects of a woman. She seems to reject them although she does not offer any alternative. A woman is a woman but her secret desire to be a male finds expression in Kamala's poetry. After her first confrontation with a male and perhaps her defloration:

ThenI wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness."⁴

But then girls are supposed to be girl-like. Who wants a tomboy? Not only her husband but society also wants to make her stand among the 'Categorizers'. Her feminine self became disgusted when she started moving about in society wearing a male dress. Society wants conformity:

...Dress in sarees, be a girl,
Be wife, they said .Be embroidered. Be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our laced-draped windows.
Be Amy , or be Kamala. Or better
Still , be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games.
(An Introduction)

Kamala Das's poems show that she has to make her identity. Not only Kamala Das but the female of the whole world is craving to make her own identity. Poem after poem she is pouring the same old wine into a new bottle. She craves for her identity. She is also a human-being. She has the right to do as her own will. But the society and family imposes a name and role on woman and she has to carry it. Kamala questions it. Why should she have a name given by someone else? Why can't she have her own existence and personality? Now this name is the role that she has to live and she is weighed down by it:

I have a name, had it for thirty
Years , chosen by someone else
For convenience....
Why? Why should I remember or bear
That sweet-sounding names, pinned to
Me, a medal undeservingly
Gained.....
You ask of
Me a silly thing. Carry
This gift of a name like a corpse and
Totter beneath its weight
And perhaps even fall...I who love
This gift of life more than all!
(Spoiling the Name)

Marriage does not provide her any comfort from this loneliness. After getting married Kamala has to face only lust and sex. There was no love in her married relationship. Even she gets no freedom to fulfill her wishes. She finds herself as a helpless victim. Instead of getting happiness, she gets a big voucher of tensions. She tells in her autobiography that she suffered a nervous breakdown as neglected wife. She was kept closed into a room where her feminine identity got suffocation. About this cruel treatment against female H.M.Parsley opines:

"All agree in recognizing the fact that females exist in the human species, today as always they make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger, we are exhorted, to be women, remain women, and become women...."⁵

The condition of female in India has been changing. In ancient times she enjoyed a reputed status. But after that her condition has been degrading day by day. In India, on one hand women are placed on pedestal and worshipped as Goddess Durga, Saraswati, and Lakshmi Devi and on the other hand they are enslaved and treated brutally. Indian women has fixed place to work for i.e. looking after her kitchen and children. The same condition of women was in

Europe that is expressed by Tennyson in his poem "The Princess":

"Man for the field and woman for the hearth
Man for the sword and for the needle she
Man to command and woman to obey".⁶

Thus woman is only to obey man. She herself has no own will, no desire. She is the Yes-man of the patriarchal society. The conflict between split-self is at core in Kamala's poetry. The achievement of Das lies in the fact that her feminist and confessional aspects are equally powerful. Kamala Das pines to live her life freely. But it was not possible due to prevalent patriarchy system. Man's attitude to woman in the society is very much a point throughout the poems. Thus the theme of freedom lies in following lines:

When, I got married
my husband said,
you may have freedom,
as much as u want.
My soul balked at this diet of ash.
Freedom became my dancing shoe,
how well I danced,
and danced without rest,
(Composition')

Women are presented as 'other' in Kamala Das's poems. She has tried to bring problems in limelight. Women were given no freedom in Postcolonial period. Even they have enjoyed a good status in ancient times. Even the position of female is getting deteriorated day by day. Kamala has tried to put forward sexual exploitation of women. She presents a horrible picture of woman's condition through her poem 'Nani'. Maids become pregnant even before they get a chance to get married. And the choice left before them is only one. i.e to finish them either by hanging or consuming poison. The tragic lines clearly show position of female:

Until the police came, she was hanging there
A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew
Turning her gently on the rope...

The female either married or unmarried craves for her identity. She wants to be recognized as a human being with heart and feelings. But the males are not ready to take them as an individual. They suppress them. Thus Kamala expresses her disappointment about the marriage which is a bond, a bond only to tie a woman beneath the will of a male. Her revolt as a woman against the traditional concept of womanhood is mismatched with any other Indian Poet. Kamala says that women are not mere toys. They are also individuals with their own preferences. About her condition after her marriage she says that her husband was her master. She was merely a puppet in his hands:

"He was like a bank locker
Steely cold and shut
Or a filing cabinet that
Only its owner could unlock

Not for a moment did I own him"
(Larger Than the Life Was He)

Kamala Das finds herself in an orthodox society with male domination. And women are merely dolls in their hands. She could not adjust herself in this type of society. Thus she wrote poems on the existence and importance of women. She throws light on the wishes and desires of female. Her poems are vehicles to bring out the suppressed tension in the minds of women, who are reluctant to speak. For a woman to attain knowledge and self realization is necessarily to find herself outside a society that ritually and actually enacts loss of self for women. Even Das was not free to fulfill her wishes. Her desires remain unfulfilled. Her husband stands for all to her. In her poem "Next to Indira Gandhi" she says about her freedom that

"You chose my clothes for me
My tutors, my hobbies, my friends,
And at fifteen with my first saree you picked
Me a husband"

Kamala Das openly revolts against the traditionally accepted, strange, queer womanhood concepts in the Indian society. She ridicules traditional imposters, show of masculine strength and also man's lust. Because of emotional vacuity in her married life, she tries to fulfill that vacuity by turning towards strangers. For this she experimented herself with sexual adventures. She goes for extra marital affairs to find true love but all other males used her sexually but none of them loved her. All of them were equally lustful. All of them were the hungers of flesh. She hungers for love but they refused to love her. In her poem "With its Quiet Tongue" Kamala asks herself:

But, why cry? Or, why even gloat
In solitude? What does a woman lose
Or even gain from a love affair?

Das has always been bold and outspoken. Kamala Das is known as the first Indian female poet as well as writer to write on sex openly. Her frankness regarding female body, sexual relations is stunning. Like the various American confessional poets Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell, Kamala Das too, delves deep in high subjectivism and remains a supreme specimen of a confessional poet. She has unrevelled the woman's psychic experience that lay hidden for ages that makes her familiar.

She is a great poet who expresses sexual desire of a female in such a manner that shocks every person. Because ours is a male dominated society. Male thinks only of his own hunger. The torment of such a state is powerfully projected by Kamala Das in her poems. She is a strong protestant of female's rights. She stands in favour of female to consider as Human with blood and heart. They have their own self and want to be recognized by society. Her poems are a mirror to readers regarding female's position in patriarchal society and also the emotions, desires of woman. The quest for self is at the core of Das's poetry. K.V.Surendran states about Kamala Das's poems: "Sometimes her women celebrates love

outside marriage and some other times they suffer from the simple reason that they are married. Most of the times women in their poems challenge the established norms of the society and assert themselves. Kamala Das's attitude can certainly be described as one of ambivalence.”⁷

Thus Quest for Self is the crux of Kamala Das's poetry. Her unfulfilled and suppressed desires break her heart. He doesn't pay any heed to her feelings. He uses her physically, mentally and emotionally. He crushes herself completely which breaks Kamala totally. Her husband's treatment to her as a rubber ball to whom he moulds as per his wish becomes the reason of Kamala's bold confessions. Kamala crossed all the boundaries made culturally by Indian Orthodox Society. Through her poems, Kamala gives vent to her desire, the desire of recognition of a human being of blood and flesh. Here she represents the whole women. Her cravings for identity in the form of poetry pave a path for other women. She gives a direction to them to struggle, to fight for their rights and to establish their own identity. That identity which is not culturally imposed upon, but it should be established by females themselves.

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