

Female Identity and Sexuality: Desire in a Patriarchal Society in the Select Poems of Kamala Das

Dr. Tauseef Mohsin

Head of the Department of English, Koshi College Khagaria, Khagaria Bihar, India

tauseefjl@gmail.com

Abstract

The multifaceted negotiation of femininity and the precarious manifestation of desire under the pressure of Indian patriarchal society are explored in this paper that has boldly come out in the chosen poems of Kamala Das. Knowing Das, Kamala Madhavikutty, as an innovator of the post-colonial literature, the research applies a post-colonial feminist approach to examine the way Das has revolutionized the confessional mode. The critique is done against conservative gender roles and how disillusionment of marriage is experienced through exploitation in marriage such as the analysis on the following; “An Introduction”, “The Old Playhouse”, “The Looking Glass”, “My Grandmother's House”, “The Sunshine Cat” and other poems. The main thesis is that the expression of female desire, namely her infinite female hungers and resulting emotional and physical betrayal, are used by Das as a powerful tool of resistance to the patriarchal power. The results indicate that Das uses personal betrayal and personal suffering to generate a universal statement of agency thus producing an essential counter-discourse to the romanticized, innocent woman figure promoted by the Indian orthodox culture.

Keywords: Multifaceted, Desire, Femininity, Patriarchal, Kamala Das

Introduction

Kamala Das (1934-2009) is one of the most prominent literary personalities in India, a leading Indian poet and renowned by her unconventional and uninhibited treatment of subjects the focus of which revolves around the history of feminine senses. Kamala Madhavikutty was born in the year 1934, in Malabar, Kerala and due to the influence of her mother and great uncle she became deeply interested in the field of poetry. Her further extensive contributions to Modern Indian English poetry made her receive the honorary title, the Mother of Modern Indian English Poetry.

Das created her own niche as she defied social conventions and resorted to the liberation of females and their identity, which, however, made her come to be referred to as a furious feminist poet. At all times her writings convey a strong sentiment of feminism with extreme personal, confessional tones railing against the exploitation and marginalization of women. Most critics at times could accuse her of being exhibitionistic or even being too personal but the fact that she addressed issues that were considered taboo in the past like sexuality, infidelity and marital dysfunction was actually a tactic. This excursion out of the obscurity characteristic of most modern poets was what gave it the radical voice it needed to adequately describe the

harshness of the oppression women were experiencing in the traditional Indian society. The issue of masculine imprisonment needed a language that could express the uncivilized feeling and injustice that was being felt.

Significance of the Study

The research has a profound meaning in terms of its contribution to the literature and feminist conversation. Through a critical reading of the poetic expression of Kamala Das, the research brings out her contribution in making Indian English poetry a platform of genuine female expression. The research does not only redefine the literary prowess of Das, but it is also an introduction to substantial debates on gender, sexuality and individuality that are still strong in the modern society. The research offers strong insights into how language can be used as an instrument of empowerment and resistance through an analysis of her work. It is an invaluable contribution to the academia, teachers, and readers who need to know the intersections of literature and culture and identity and reaffirms the timeless relevance of Kamala Das as a voice of emotional reality and social commentary in Indian literature.

Objectives of the Study

The major aim of this paper is to seek the significant issues that define the poetic imagination of Kamala Das. It attempts to look at her unique way of using language, her depiction of female desire and sexuality, and how she depicts her identity in a patriarchal society. The research will also consider how her works have influenced present Indian literature in terms of culture and literature bearing in mind her confessional style as a challenge to the taboos of the society and her works as a new avenue of women-expression in literary works.

Female Identity and Sexual Desire in a Patriarchal Society

In the poem "An Introduction", which is usually interpreted as a courageous statement of female identity and selfhood, Kamala Das manages to present a strong argument against the patriarchal institutions that aim at locking women within the rigid social and linguistic frames. Das brings up the mixtures of identity, sexuality and the expression of self, in a world where the body of a woman is policed, as well as her words through the voice of the speaker. The poem begins with a statement of self-identification, i.e. "I do not know politics" (Das 1), but I know the names of those in power, setting instantly, and distinctly, the voice of the speaker as part of the postcolonial Indian experience. She describes herself as an Indian woman who is of Malabar of dark skin, multi-lingual and proud of her multi-ethnic cultural identity. Das stresses the multiplicity of the female self that cannot be defined by any single definition by stating that she speaks three languages, writes two and dreams one. Her subversion of linguistic purism-her unwillingness to be quieted so as to write in English- is a reflection of her subversion of social and gender inhibitions. To her language is a sign of liberation and ownership of herself since she maintains that whatever language she speaks is hers, and it is her lived experience and emotional truth.

I don't know politics but I know the names
 Of those in power, and can repeat them like
 Days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru.
 I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,

I speak three languages, write in

Two, dream in one. (Das 1-6)

As the poem moves on, Das incorporates this claim of linguistic identity with unreserved investigation of female body and sexual desire into it. The speaker remembers her teenage years and the fact when she was initiated into sex- an experience of both discovery and transgression. The demands that come with being a woman weigh down on her body making it a burden. She is required to fit the demands of society conforming to her, to wear sarees, to cook, to act as a silent obedient wife, and thereby obliterating her individuality. Her hair-cutting, donning her brothers clothes as well as denying the conventional femininity is a desperate measure of regaining her identity in a world where women are being objectified and trapped. The crashing voices on the society which tell her that she should be like other women are the voices of patriarchy who want to subjugate the female agency and sensuality.

However, Das is able to turn this subjugation into a self-reflection that would be universal. Her affection to one man is not just individual experience, but it is a symbol of the universal discord of the desire and restraint, love and loss. The speaker identifies herself with all women who want love and fulfillment in the world of men, and the man is turned into an objectification of all lovers that are hungry and need to be satisfied. The use of I in the poem is reinforced by repeating this word throughout the poem to demonstrate a common sense of human identity beyond gender and social levels.

“Then ... I wore a shirt and my

Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored

My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl

Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,

Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,

Belong, cried the categorizers”. (Das 35-41)

In a word, the poem is the statement of selfhood that cannot be muffled by the patriarchal standards. Kamala Das reinforces the concept of female identity by creating a new vision of it based on desire, rebellion, and emotional truth. Her voice of the speaker, personal and universal at the same time, breaks all the strict principles of gender and language and proves that the only real freedom is authenticity, expression and feeling itself. By doing so, Das is able to reestablish the female body and voice as a victim of patriarchal repression as well as create an eternal conversation about the right to self-determination in a world that is constantly trying to name and define women.

Whereas most of the poems of Kamala Das are praises of desire as an important demonstration of freedom and identity, some of the poems challenge the social systems that restrain the independence of women, especially marriage. Throughout her work, marriage has been a locus that has not provided the fulfilling place but rather an enforcing environment where women are forced to deny their individuality and comply with the strict roles of domesticity. Das poignantly recreates such reality of suffocation in “The Old Playhouse”, the existence of married life being an experience of emotional and psychological confinements.

“You addressed me as wife,

I learned to dissolve saccharine into your tea,
And to present at the proper time the vitamins". (Das 53)

By using suggestive imagery and confessional narration, she accentuates the conflicts between sexual desire and social standards, and the implication is that the identity of women is often subjected to male standards. The poem turns into an indictment of how tradition and social prescription impose passivity and silence, as well as the self-denial, and the longtime battle of the self-expression and agency in the domestic realm. It is in this sense that personal plight of women is expressed not only in the poems of Das but also the culture in general that governs female experience, which renders her work an exciting experience of identity, desire, and resistance to a patriarchal society.

The poetry of Kamala Das restores the female desire to be a valid and necessary part of the identity of women. Her poems are not afraid to predict the physical and emotional desires of women in rebellion against the orthodox images of Indian women as being modest, subservient, and self-sacrificing. She does not depict desire as a flaw of morality, but rather as a force of nature which is empowering and asserts individuality and self-awareness. To Das, recognition of desire goes to be a form of rebellion to patriarchal repression and culture silencing. She is not afraid to use her poem "The Looking Glass" to urge women to be comfortable with their bodies and sensuality without feeling guilty or inhibited.

"Give him what makes you woman, the smell of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts". (Das 23)

This poem serves to break down the social constructs that criminalize female sexuality, which are sinful or shameful and proposes that women look at their bodies as locations of strength, beauty, and truth. The work by Das is therefore an exploration of womanhood in all its fullness, sensual, emotional, and self-assertive, and it defies the age-old taboos that have been the mainstay in subtly restricting the expression of love and desire by women.

Das is always grouped with the Western confessional poets, especially Sylvia Plath, but the reasons and attention are quite different as it is associated with cultural background. Whereas Plath will frequently delve into her inner psychological battles that are indicative of her Western heritage, Das bases much of her poetry on her social circumstances, cultural values and the gender roles that are so specific to India. Her confession poetry is, however not as much about internal chaos but more about external suppression.

Her tone of anger and protest is appropriate since she employs a free poetic mode rather than the usual metrical form. Her voice is a voice of disobeying which does not accept the delicacy of critics and society. Also, her statement of self, I am what I am is a philosophical riposte to the social norm, Fit in. By making herself known and by making herself known as an internally existing rather than an externally configured essence, Das manages to reclaim the power of defining herself, to enclose her identity, and thus making her personal utterance a strong political statement of independence. The high degree of self-centeredness is a strategic intellectual and emotional escape of the outer cultural restrictions.

The other poems of Das, such as the "My Grandmother house" and the "Sunshine cat", give a deep insight into the female identity and sexual desire under a patriarchal society. In

“My Grandmother House”, Das elicits a memory and very complicated childhood, memory and belonging by looking back at how women identity is influenced by the familial expectations and societal conventions. The house of the grandmother is both a literal and a symbolic one, a symbol of safety, history, and cultural heritage, but also indicates the restrictions women have in terms of tradition, which was the conflict between the freedom of the personality and the roles given to them. The personal tone of the poem and the abundance of imagery shows the desire to be independent and to define themselves and the ways in which the consciousness of a female comes to negotiate the world organized by man.

Das in the “Sunshine Cat” gives her eyes towards desire and eroticism and praises the sensual and emotional aspects of womanhood which are often repressed or despised by society. In this case, sexual desire is not portrayed as something disgraceful or sinful but as something that is normal to express selfhood, which is vital to the female experience. Das anticipates the body and feelings of the woman as a place of independence and imagination through amusing, confessional, and even provocative images, proclaiming that there can be no such thing as a desire without identity. Her outspoken representation opposes the patriarchal norms which aim to silence or control female sexuality to demand the acknowledgement of inner life of women and their right to express longing, pleasure, and passion.

In these as well as other poems, Kamala Das has repeatedly challenged the patriarchal systems which aim to create and circumscribe women. Marriage, family requirements and social decency tend to seem like confinements that push women to subjugate desire and adjust to pre-programmed personas. However, the poetic voice of Das does not comply with these enclosures, where the language, images, and the autobiographical story are employed to recover the female agency. Her identity and sexual desire cannot be discussed outside of her analysis of the oppression of women in society: by revealing the personal, human and sexual nature of women, she goes against the conventions that oppress and do not allow women to express themselves. Through this, Das reconstructs the individual into the political by making her poetry a powerful statement of the longstanding battle of self, independence, and the assertion of woman desire in a male-dominated world.

“Old Playhouse” is a violent protest against patriarchy in which dominance of the male figure leads to the dwarfing of the female. The poem narrates the pain that comes up as a result of sexuality without love that infuriates the feminine sense of the speaker. The male body objectifies the lady and proves her body to be a device of domination and dominance and not a means of mutual orgasm.

The literature of the evidence carries the crudities of this used submission: give him all, Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of. Long hair, the odor of musk between the breast, and everything of yours. Endless female hungers". The list of explicit, physical description, such as warm shock of menstrual blood (which is against the culture) is a rebellious assertion of the biological fact. However, this complete physical endowment is received not with true affection but with exploitation, which leads to the poet hating the body when it is regarded as nothing more than a skeleton of flesh and bones.

The importance of the conventional clothing, that is, the sari, could not be possibly overestimated. When the poet is instructed to "Dress in sarees" the dress becomes her cultural wrapping and constriction of her own true personality, making her conform and required to be modest. In addition, the struggle is to gain her physical and emotional space. Such a fight by the woman to find a place where she can be, as a psychological or physical home, is directly connected to her deprivation of independent existence as she ties to the limiting social systems. The language of protest starts as political and social protest in An Introduction, although as the speaker tries to become one of them (which is usually by means of marriage), she finds that even the institution of marriage is repressive. This understanding drives her outcry inward, on the transactional violence and emotional starvation that resides in the relationship of the male to the female, which is constant evidence of a radicalization of her feminist voice.

Conclusion

The poetry of Das is a revolutionary step in the Indian literature today. Her open treatment of female sexuality, emotional fragility and identity seeking made her put the lines of the female voices in poetry back into a different perspective. There is no denying that Das was both honest and intense in her rejection of conventional restraints in her articulation of the inner life of women, and her expression of the conflict between personal freedom and social conformity. Her confessional tone did not only confront the patriarchal norms but also successfully repossessed womanhood as a realm of power, emotion, and self-awareness. Desire in her poems is not only a way of resistance but also a way of self-realization showing the problems of love, loneliness, and longing.

The poetic voice of Das goes through the personal and political, making personalized experiences universal in terms of gender, autonomy, and human bondage. Her simplicity but suggestive language is the rawness of emotionality and the beauty of telling the truth, which makes her work highly relatable and timeless. As a feminist icon and a pioneer in literature, Kamala Das will always encourage readers and literary authors to be authentic and fearless in expressing themselves. She is remembered as a woman who fearlessly spoke out against the silences of the woman sex and transformed personal suffering into eternal art.

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