

Poetry as Protest: A trans feminist reading of Kalki Subramaniam's poem The War and The Rebel

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Abstract

This research paper critically explores the two poems *The Rebel* and *The War* written by Kalki Subramaniam a transgender writer and activist. These poems are taken from her book *We will not be erased* published in June 2025, both poems function as powerful act of the writer's poetic protest which articulates her own experiences. Kalki shares her plight for survival on the basics of gender marginalization, socio-political oppression, and emotional resilience. The poem *The Rebel* challenges patriarchal constructs surrounding cisgender woman marriage and the role of tradition which becomes barrier for self-liberation and identity reclamation. The poem *The War* challenges the global injustices of war, displacement, and poverty. Kalki continuously exposes the silence and exploitation of transgender lives in Indian society. Use of bold imagery, repetition of phrase and emotional narration makes poetic landscape of the poem filled with personal trauma intersects with global suffering. This paper argues Kalki's poem become a tool for activism which transcends literary boundaries combining aesthetic expression with radical empathy. Kalki's voice within the broader discourse of transfeminism narration in resistance literature, raises her voice in disrupting dominant narratives and deconstructs binary frameworks imposed in the name of culture and tradition.

Keywords: Transfeminism, poetic protest, gender identity, resistance, marginalization, feminist voice, trauma, social justice.

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Introduction:

Kalki Subramaniam is a well-known Indian transgender activist, writer, artist, and entrepreneur from Pollachi, Tamilnadu. She is the founder of the Sahodari Foundation, a dedicated forum that works for the economic and social upliftment of trans women; she is also a member of the National Council for Trans Persons. She

has moved to the length and breadth of the nation, met hundreds of trans people, and worked for their rights and issues. Kalki has received numerous awards for her social work. She has received the Radhika Sen Memorial Award, the Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Award, and so on. Her book 'We are not the Others' was included in Harvard Business School Library, and she was invited to speak at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. At present Kalki has come out with the book titled *We Will Not Be Erased*. This book is filled with diaries, paper collections, very short stories, notes, monologues, essays, illustrations, and collections of poems. This paper tries to bring out the writer's idea of using poetry as protest to reflect the social criticism imposed on the transgender community.

Kalki Subramaniam's poem *The War* bursts with instinctive and emotional poetic testimony that transcends individual pain to encapsulate collective trauma, global injustice, and personal resilience. Kalki as a transgender activist, poet, and artist, draws her emotions from her lived experiences of marginalization and fuses them with a global consciousness of suffering. This poem *The War* becomes a powerful feminist and anti-war declaration that is infused with intersectionality, defiance, and humanistic yearning. This paper analyzes the poem's thematic richness, stylistic choices, and socio-political implications.

The opening lines of the poem *The War* by Kalki directly establish the profound empathetic connection between the speaker and the global victims of past wars. The poem begins with a simple image: 'She sees a picture of a dead child and she feels them all.' This line serves as an important narrative that emotionally anchors in the mind of the reader. The 'she' in the poem is an individual, yet she bears the collective grief of humanity all over the world. Kalki raises several conflict-ridden regions like Ukraine, Russia, Congo, Gaza, Israel, Myanmar, Eelam (Sri Lanka), Yemen, and Kashmir. Through this evocative imagery, she captures and depicts the horrors of war, displacement caused by the war, and the tragedy of war which causes death. The repetition of the phrase 'she feels them all' becomes a refrain of the empathetic absorption state of the narrator which highlights the porous boundaries between self and other.

The poet's body-gendered classification of being a trans woman leads to marginalization and violation that are compared with an anonymous suffering in war zones. This bodily identification in the poem transforms as an act witnessed by the trans women. This also reveals how geopolitical violence like war becomes personal in her life and expresses how global people are affected by war which is systematically silenced by weapons. She as a transgender individual becomes a living embodiment of global wounds caused by gender inequality. Kalki's speaker does not merely sympathize with the situation but internalizes pain. Her empathy in the poem is not merely performative or distanced but it is physically and psychically consuming. Kalki Subramaniam's identity as a transgender woman profoundly

informs the thematic structure of the poem. The line 'She begs at traffic signals by day, beds with strangers by night' (30). brutally exposes the twin conditions of poverty and sexual exploitation that many transgender people endure. This line reflects on multiple levels: it exposes systemic failures of gendered violence caused by economic precarity, and the commodification of queer bodies.

The poem does not romanticize suffering instead it exposes its raw painful realities. In placing the speaker as "a refugee at home," Kalki highlights the internal exile faced by transgender people in heteronormative and cis-normative of the different societies. The poem reframes the meaning of displacement not just as a geographical or political condition but as a social and existential state. To be a transgender in a patriarchal society is to face everlasting exile, to her this exile and struggle is to claim her rights, and dignity and to conquer recognition. The use of the word "she" throughout the poem is significant. It affirms gender identity in a world that often refuses to do so. By refusing to use a first-person "I," Kalki gives her voice a universal tone, yet she anchors it in a gendered embodiment. This enables the reader of the poem to operate both as a personal lament and a collective war cry.

This poem orients multiple external wars that happen for territorial, ethnic, and political causes, this metaphorizes a trans woman who owns an internal war for dignity, survival, and voice. 'She claps in fury, she claps in grief' (30) is a powerful line, loaded with cultural symbolism of Indian transgender people (often referred to as Hijras) who make traditional claps that are used as a form of expression that is often misinterpreted or trivialized. Kalki reclaims this gesture as an act of resistance. Clapping becomes protest: against power, against war, against greed.

The war depicted here is not just physical war but it is a psychological, emotional, and spiritual one, 'She knows displacement, she knows homelessness, she knows losing family, she knows the chilling fear, and the ignominious oppression, she knows them all' (30). These lines clearly explain that a trans woman in the Indian society will undergo and experience d homelessness, displacement, oppression, living in fear for survival and so on. The poem lines also render trauma as both historical and contemporary, personal and political. This litany of knowing becomes a moral indictment of a world that systematically inflicts suffering on the vulnerable. Kalki's poem in this sense does not allow the reader to remain passive but it demands reckoning.

The most striking transformation in the poem is the speaker's journey from victimhood to empowered defiance. The line 'She was broken into pieces, but now she rises as phoenix' (31) highlights the resurrection of the Phoenix bird signifies 'She' is not just for survival, but transcendence. The phoenix becomes a metaphor for the indomitable transgender spirit, fighting for women surviving the war of sexual violence and trans fighting to reclaim life and dignity. Similarly, the line 'she was

silenced and stripped, but now she roars like a lioness' (31) marks a radical reclamation of voice. The stripping here is possible to refer to both sexual violence and metaphorical indicating the systemic erasure of identity. But the word 'roar' signifies a reclaiming of narrative agency. The lioness, a symbol of strength and maternal ferocity, replaces the wounded, violated body. Kalki's poetic strategy here is radical she turns pain into power, and erasure the pain into a roar.

The poem *The War* is not just a poem filled with verse but it is a political statement. It denounces war, patriarchal violence, transphobia, capitalism, and casteism without explicitly naming them. The poem criticizes how power structures render these people's lives disposable. The victims' images are named as dead children, weeping wives, and sexually assaulted minors which are not simply statistics but are victims of collateral damage. Moreover, the poem has an ethical dimension in it. It asks what it means to "feel them all" in a world that is becoming increasingly numb to violence. The speaker's hyper-empathy challenges the desensitization of media culture, where suffering is consumed as a spectacle. Kalki's poem does not let the reader scroll past but it pulls them in and forces them to bear witness. This is Kalki's insists on their humanity.

Stylistically, the poem *The War* is free verse, which suits its emotional intensity and thematic expansiveness. The lack of punctuation enhances the free flow of feelings and thoughts, mimicking the breathlessness of grief and rage. Repetition of the phrase "she feels them all," and "she knows them all" creates rhythm and emphasis, reinforcing the continuity of suffering and resistance of trans women. The use of global locations like Ukraine, Russia, Congo, Gaza, Israel, Myanmar, Eelam (Sri Lanka), Yemen, and Kashmir lends the poem a documentary feel, while its lyrical cadence makes it deeply poetic. Kalki does not use ornate language in her poem instead, her diction is direct, grounded, and affectively potent. The poem's emotional charge is not diluted by abstraction, it is intensified by specificity. In *The War*, Kalki Subramaniam merges the personal and political war with the poetic and activist life she poses. It is a work of profound empathy, fierce resistance, and radiant hope for trans women. The poem exemplifies how art can be a weapon in the hands of the marginalized and vulnerable not to be used for destruction (war), but for survival, solidarity, and transformation. This poem becomes a mirror, a voice, and a torch for transgender people, war survivors, refugees, and all oppressed communities, *The War* demands not only to be read but to be felt, acted upon, and remembered.

Kalki Subramaniam's poem *The Rebel* is a powerful, provocative, and deeply human outcry against the social injustices that are confined to women by patriarchal systems. *The Rebel*, poem shares lived experience outside the boundaries imposed by gender norms. This poem serves as a tool for feminist manifesto and a call invitation for women's liberation. This poem directly challenges the readers, especially women to rethink the roles they have been conditioned to accept in the form of responsibility.

In the first line of the poem, the poet tries to draw the attention of the woman and asks, "Ay woman, when will you rebel against them, those who trumpet your puberty?" (60). This line sets the tone of the poem and its prime purpose of writing it. This poem is not merely filled with words but a cry, a true call to consciousness of the individual. The term "trumpet your puberty" can be interpreted as how patriarchal society publicly identifies and controls a woman's bodily changes, which are often celebrated with faked masks to possess deeper control mechanisms. Puberty in women is a personal, biological journey, but here it becomes a societal checkpoint for the next journey. Puberty in Indian culture becomes a signal for marriage, motherhood, and domestication. Kalki's question is, when will you rebel against them? Twist and hammers on the people who glorify puberty and direct her voice on women, trying to evoke the silenced inner selves, urging them to wake up and revolt. The second stanza of the poem delves into the oppressive expectations where women are forced to fulfill the institution of marriage. Kalki asks cisgender woman, 'When will you rebel against marrying a stranger?' (60), is a direct attack on the cultural norm of the arranged marriage system in India. Even in the 21st century, women's choices are often secondary, while the first choice is made by tradition and social standards. By highlighting the absurdity of spending women's lives with a person chosen by others, the poem unravels the illusion of consent in systems of coercion. The aim and goal of the women is to live and perform the aspects of being a "good wife"; women are reduced to a life of endless service, as Kalki writes, 'serving your husband, serving your children, serving your in-laws, serving' (61).

This repetition of the word "serving" is emotional and intentional. It reflects the cyclical, monotonous life led by many women, who are sacrificed at the altar of familial duty. The phrase 'You must learn to nod your head, isn't it?' (61) is particularly striking. This line captures the tragic internalization of obedience, submission, and self-effacement that women are trained into by societal boundaries. Nodding becomes a symbol of silent consent and acceptance, a mask worn by women to survive losing self-respect and dignity.

Kalki slams women for taking the heartbreaking decision of being submissive to an unknown man, sacrificing her personal dreams and goals. She writes, 'What about your ambitions, your passions, and your desires? Why do you burn them in the wedding fire?' (62). Here, Kalki uses the fire image literally to represent destruction. In many Indian weddings, fire is central to all the rituals; brides walk around it, pledge themselves in front of it, and worship it, and their husbands often symbolically cut the ties they possess with their past identities. Kalki turns this fire into a funeral pyre for women's dreams, passions, and individual will. It is not just a tradition and culture; rather, it becomes an annihilation. The line 'you work hard for them, and forget the fire in you' (62) reveals the poet's recognition of the inner strength that women possess within them but are often discouraged from by societal self-prioritization.

Women's acceptances can be sensed in the lines "If I ask you why, you tell me with guilt, 'This is what women have done forever.'" (62). This reply from women is crucial as it lays bare how patriarchy sustains itself not only through external control but also through internalized submission on women. By imposing an idea that women carry generational guilt, patriarchy allows itself to nullify women's wishes and desires. The most profound turn in the poem occurs when the speaker shifts the focus to herself (a trans woman) and offers a stark contrast to the normative female experience:

"I wish you were born like me,
to be free, to live authentically, breaking the chain of lies." (62-63)

This is where Kalki's identity as a transgender woman adds a powerful layer of insight. She belongs to a community that lives outside mainstream gender norms; this is the community that is often stigmatized, yet paradoxically more liberated in some existential ways. By saying, "We don't menstruate, we don't marry a stranger, we don't marry" (63), Kalki is not denying biological or social complexities. She also rejects the chains of compulsory heterosexuality, biological essentialism, and traditional family structures since these are impossible for trans women. She explains the plain reality of trans life. What she offers is not a romanticized life of ease. She is honest.

'We may
live in slums,
and struggle
to meet our ends'. (62)

Shows of raw struggle are juxtaposed with a kind of existential freedom of the trans community, 'You will know the real meaning of being you' (63). The phrase "being you" echoes like a mantra throughout the poem, which is the prime tool to ignite the minds of oppressed women. The repetition of 'when will you rebel to be you?' and 'when will you be you?' (64) is more than a poetic device; it is a philosophical and psychological challenge put forth before women. It is a call to authenticity, to the rebirth of selfhood. Kalki's use of metaphorical contrast between "an exploding lava" and "a melting candle" serves as one of the most vivid images in the poem. Lava is a dangerous, uncontrolled, and destructive outcome of a volcano, but it is also natural, powerful, and transformative. In contrast, a candle is small and artificial, quietly melts away, and its light flickers slowly, consumed in stillness. According to Kalki, many women's lives are like melting candles, which are elegant, passive, and self-consuming. She shares that true life must be like the lava: messy, fierce, and untamed, not merely candle-like and alive.

The final stanzas of the poem picture an alternative life where one can dance, sing, cry, laugh, and 'be loud and be yourself' (64). The freedom of the individual who is emotionally unrestrained, vocally assertive, and personally expressive is depicted as a form of salvation. It is significant that Kalki does not preach revolution

as mere political rebellion, but she defines it through embodiment, through joy, art, vulnerability, and the primal scream of selfhood. This is not just a transgender woman speaking to cisgender women. It's a liberated soul speaking to all who have been caged, urging them to fly. Kalki becomes one of the rebels who beckons others to rise with her not in imitation but in individual authenticity. She does not offer her life as a model, but she offers it as proof that revolt is possible. "*The Rebel*" by Kalki Subramaniam is a poetic force that speaks from the low margins to the mainstream. Her poem unearths uncomfortable truths and does so with concern and fierce honesty. Through her words, Kalki exposes the silent pain of traditional womanhood and contrasts it with a trans life of radical authenticity of life lived by choice without pressure.

The poem *The Rebel* echoes with the voices of countless women who have been silenced across generations in the name of culture and tradition. Kalki acts as both a witness and a provocateur. She does not merely call for rebellion, but she plainly demands self-recognition. In doing so, she elevates rebellion from a political act to a spiritual awakening. Ultimately, *The Rebel* is not just about gender, patriarchy, or marginalization. It is about the courage. Kalki reminds us courage is the most sacred act of all.

The poem *The Rebel* and *The War* offer a poetic manifesto for the 21st-century marginalized soul of womanhood. These two poems speak from different emotional landscapes but has one intimate and challenge is to face the society which remain silent seeing all the brutality imposed on the them. Kalki Subramaniam does not write poem to entertain the readers rather she writes to awaken the inner sprit the oppressive women. She believes, her art of poetry is the only tool to awaken them involving in activism. Through "*The Rebel*," she calls on women to reclaim their selves and Through "*The War*," she offers an empathy to the world's pain to reclaiming dignity for herself and her community. Both her poems' questions what benefits does human receive in the world due to dehumanization? So, she concludes in asking "When will you rebel? When will you rise"? She Leaves her agony for Universal judgement.

References:

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