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Feminine Ethos in the Selected Poems of Kamala Das

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Abstract: The present paper attempts to highlight the feminist ethos in the poetry of Kamala Das. She was a bilingual writer who wrote both in English and Malayalam. She represents whole Indian women in general and herself in particular, whose actual value and symbolic value has been marginalized by man. The present paper aims to highlight the feminine sensibility in her poems. She looks very determined to revolt against the conventional society's definition of womanhood. This paper explores the emotional emptiness and sterility of her married life and the intensity of misery of the wife who surrenders to her husband who is repulsive, and with whom she has no emotional contact at all. Her poetry shows her hatred against dominance of one on another. From the past history of the world, female has been the marginalized and subordinated by the dominant power of male. Kamala Das as a bold writer uses the satirical style or the explicit mode of poetry writing in exploring the issues of Gender, caste, class and tradition. This paper also attempts to highlight Kamala Das's way of portraying women yearning for love and sex in the male dominated society. Her poetry is full of frustration, and resentment she experienced as a girl, wife and mother.

Keywords: Feminism, woman, patriarchy, subjugation and love.

Feminism is a movement that shares a common goal to define, and achieve personal and social equality of sexes. The subjugation and oppression of woman by male authority has been the central theme to discuss in feminism. Indian writings in English gained a platform rapidly and started writing poem's and novels in order to question the prominent old patriarchal norms of the society. Kamala Das stands among the pioneers in the field of poetry to explore the world of woman in India. Her way of narrating every aspect of human relationship is wonderful. She is frank in narrating the incidents and situations with a touch of open heartedness. Her female characters are



shown as struggling with the customs and traditions that tie them in their freedoms and rights. She served the humanity and extend her helping hand to the poorest of the poor.

Kamala Das or Kamala suraya known by her pen name Madhavikutty and Kamala was one of the leading Malayalam authors from Kerela. She wrote many short stories and poetry collections. She was also nominated for the Nobel Prize along with Dorris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer. Her major poetry collections include – *The Descendants*, *The Old Playhouse*, and *The Summer in Calcutta*. In her poetry collections the major theme remains of love, betrayal, anguish and frankness. Her poetry is praised for its fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice. Her poetry is full of feminist imagery focusing on critiques of marriage, motherhood, women's relationship to their bodies and control of their sexuality. There are some women writers who dare to write from women's point using the language which are also induced with patriarchal ego. They represent women as they are. Kamala Das straight forwardly express her experience of being a women. She has written as a woman that one can identify herself. She dares to challenge the tradition that silence females in the society. Her poetry is full of expression of her frustration, and failures in a male dominated world and also shows how she tried to maintain her individuality and feminine identity. As Betty Friedan's states that:

Some women prefer to be treated like a person, not like a woman. They prefer to be independent, stand on their own two feet and generally don't care for concessions that imply that they are inferior, weak or that they need special attention and can't take care of themselves. (Friedan 440)

Kamala Das had an unhappy, dissatisfied life right from her birth. She was a victim to patriarchal prejudices and discriminations that were common of that time. She converted into Islam in 1999 by taking a new name Kamala Suraya. As a woman she herself works out and chooses feminist literature to express the shared experiences of women's oppression. The central strain in many of her poems poems were, the strong desire for freedom, including the freedom to rebel against the male dominated authority. She experienced the bitterness of sexism and patriarchy from



her childhood. Her parents always considered her as a burden and was married at an early age to a relative. She was thus compelled to become a premature wife and mother. She thus complains about her life in one of her poems as;

I was sent away, to protect a family's
Honour, to save a few cowards, to defend some
Abstractions, sent to another city to be a relatives wife. (Das lines 5-8).

Kamala Das has a very frustrating experience of her married life. Her relationship with her husband is nothing but the frustrating experience because of not having any mutual understanding and love for each other's needs. They feel like strangers to each other. Their empty hearts show emotional sterility, barrenness, meaninglessness of life. In her poem *Freaks*, Kamala Das searches for true relationship with her lover. She expresses the grief for lack of sexual passions. There is only hunger but no love for each other. This shows that her poetry begins from the darker end. Her male partner is totally insensitive to her emotional desires. She says;

I am a freak, it's only
To save my face, I flaunt at
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust (Das lines 18-20).

The woman characters in her poems play various roles as the unfulfilled wife, mistress to lusty man, silent suffering women. Her poetry exhibits that Kamala Das is conscious about the social problems around her. She comments on social injustices and the inequality towards women in her poetry. In the poem *Introduction* we find the resentment and refusal of Kamala Das as;

Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife,
They cried. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Don't sit on walls or peep in
Through our lace draped windows (Das lines 33-38).

Kamala Das is a rebel against the male dominant authority and spokesman of feminine sensibility. It is through her poetry that we get the sense of self that had struggled a lot in order to maintain



relation between emotional and sexual needs. Her poetry deals with the unfulfilled love and sex that she experienced in her life. Her frustration that she experienced in her life can be expressed in the following lines from *The Looking Glass* as;

Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers (Das lines 12-15).

Her poetry is frank and straight forward expression of feminine sensibility. Through her poetry she searches for the essential women. She violates the traditional norms of society in order to secure women to a position where she will be given significance and respect. It is the revolt of feminine sensitiveness against male centered ego that takes the dominative role. She writes from the depth of her own experience. She exposes the sterility of society where woman is denied from basic rights and spiritual gratifications. She remains the pioneer by her bold confessions to the woman poets in modern Indian English poetry. In the poem *The Sunshine Cat* Kamala Das portrays the image of sex and note of betrayal to go together. She expressed the betrayal in love and physical exploitation of the women in it. She describes the plight of a woman who has become a victim to the lust of many men. The poem itself begins with a colloquial speech rhythm and conversational tone. She calls her husband as a coward, who never loved her but only satisfies his desires. He locks her in a room full of books, where only a streak of light could pass. She explains this in her poem *The Sunshine Cat* in a very loud manner as ;

... Her husband shut her
In every morning; locked her in a room full of books
With a streak of sunshine lying near the door, like
A yellow cat, to keep her company, but soon,
Winter came and one day while locking her in, he...



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He returned to take her out, she was a cold and
Half dead woman, now of no use at all to men (Das lines 14-18).

The works of Das are centrally preoccupied with sexuality and female pleasures that breaks out of a hetero normative matrix. The conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male emerges as a major theme in her poetry. She is intensely conscious of herself as a woman. Her vision is vitally particularized by the women's point of view. In her poetry she has dealt with private humiliations and sufferings which are the stock themes of confessional poetry. The crucial factor in all her poetry is the perfect way of treating the intimate experience without having any trace of pathos. Indian critics have found in her poems the voice of the new liberated women without realizing that she never speaks on the behalf of anybody, but herself. Kamala Das in her poetry concerns herself as victim. Yearning for love and sex became the main theme in her poetry. All her quests for love end in the disaster of lust. As Simone De Beauvoir pointed out in her acclaimed book *The Second Sex*. "Women aren't wrong at all when they reject the rules of life that have been introduced into the world, in as much as it is the men who have made these without them" (Beauvior 11).

Kamala Das is a poet of moods and she writes about so many things that momentarily arrest her alienations; example seasons, children, seashores, morning trees, phone calls, problems of composition, the ferns and the maggots, the swamps and the blue birds. These things show that Kamala Das emerge from hell well- chosen themes now and then, and thereby create an impression of diversity and variety. Her poetry is honest and human as she is. The narrowness of her range is thus widened and the monotony caused by frequent reversions to the same subject and mood partly removed.

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