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Intersection of Women in Kerala: Analysis of Kamala Das' An Introduction

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Abstract: *An Introduction* delineates an intersection of women in Kerala haunted by the ghosts of caste discrimination, religious fundamentalism, patriarchy and regional aspects. The poem portrays the kaleidoscopic view of victimisation of women. Women in Kerala were abstained from the mainstream based on their different identities created by the forces of oppression. *An Introduction* establishes the identity of women in the society and questions the norms of suffocation created by the mainstream society. Traditional Feminism fails to convey the aspects of women expressed in the poem. Intersectional analysis could unearth the intersecting factors of victimisation. The present paper tries to analyse the poem *An Introduction* based on intersectional perspective.

Keywords: Feminism, Intersectionality, Kamala Das, Kerala, Women.

Introduction

Kamala Das is one of the prominent writers in India who is having a bilingual attitude towards her creative framework. She writes fiction in Malayalam and poetry in English. She is famous for her confessional mode of poetry execution as she expresses all her inner self through her words and phrases in the poems.

Kamala Das's search for ideal love and the resultant disappointment seem to involve the psychological phenomenon of 'the animus' struggling to project the masculine imprint as interpreted by Jung. The attempt to seek in every lover, the perfection of masculine being is destined to end in failure because of the impossibility of realising the ideal in human form. (Chavan 64)

Basically from Kerala, from the specific region of Malabar she expresses the psyche of women and universalises the feelings of the women all over the world through her words in poetry. The poem *An Introduction* is basically analysed as a feminist poem where the narrator expresses her inner self and faces the criticism from different patriarchal authorities and by the agents of religious fundamentalism. "The poem shows the poet's intense awareness of women having been subjected to all kinds of discrimination: social, cultural, political, (and) sexual" (Chandra, xii). The problem with the feminist analysis of a creative work of



art is that it is focusing only on the perspective of the gender. But the problems of women in different parts of the world is not solely based on the factor of gender but there are many other factors which affect the normal life of women in different regions of the world and it can be only analysed through the intersectional analysis of literary works.

Intersectionality

According to Cambridge Dictionary, Intersectionality is “The way in which different types of discrimination (unfair treatment because of a person's sex, race, etc.) are connected to and affect each other”. The term Intersectionality was coined and popularised by the African-American intellectual and writer Kimberly Crenshaw who analysed the problems of different sections of the society focusing on different agents of suppression and discrimination. So the points expressed in the poem cannot be confined into a monolithic concept of feminist analysis but it must be analysed based on the intersectional analysis which can put forth different aspects of suppression and discrimination existing in the specific geographical places. “Feminist movements in India have always been inflected by questions of caste, class, and religion” (Chaudhuri 8).

Intersectional analyses the problems of individual from different perspectives and addresses the unique experiences of discrimination and suppression of any individual. It considers the multiple possibilities of marginalisation based on gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. With the help of intersectional analysis the inequalities and injustice towards an individual, especially the marginalised communities of the society can be brought to the mainstream. Intersectional analysis is best suited to bring out the problems of women in the society because the problems of women in different societies differ based on their age, class, race, colour and sexuality. According to Nivedita Menon: “Gender is not the only lens through which women's experiences must be understood” (7). But Intersectional analysis of the problems of women is much better than the feminist perspective towards the problems of women because Intersectional moves away from the gender dichotomy of man women to multi layered gender identities and explores the different manifestations of sexual aspirations. According to Uma Narayan: “Third-world women must be seen through their own cultural and historical contexts...” (12).



“Indian feminism is regionally influenced, making it impossible to view it as a monolithic structure” (Nahal 6). While feminism revolves around the fight against patriarchy, male chauvinism, and male dominance, existing in the society and the methods used by patriarchal agents to suppress and discriminate women in the society, Intersectional analysis explores different forces of suppression towards women apart from patriarchal agents which are much serious than the oppressive methods used by the patriarchal authority. So Intersectional analysis of women improves the exploration of the problems of women in the society and helps in the easy tackling of the problems in the society. Intersectionality analyses the problems of individual women based on the religion, culture, language, race, colour and living conditions. While feminism approach the problems of women based on the patriarchal norms existing in the society, Intersectional analysis goes far beyond the single analysis of patriarchal suppression towards different agents of suppression which exist in the society to discriminate and suppress women from the mainstream.

Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life. As an analytic tool, intersectionality views categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, class, national, ability, ethnicity, and age-among others-as interrelated and mutually shaping one another. Intersectionality is a way of understanding and explaining complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences (Collins 1).

So, intersectional analysis of Kamala Das’ poem wide opens the multifaceted problems of women in Kerala. “Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism...” (Crenshaw 140). Kerala is peculiar with its natural beauty and specific position in the political and social atmosphere of the largest democracy. The state is pioneer in attaining cent percentage literacy with the progress and development excelling the fellow states of the nation. The literacy and exposure to the outside world even before the colonial invasion of the region helped the state to attain political awareness and knowledge about the contemporary politics and affairs of the state and the country. Because of the higher literacy rate and political awareness and exposure to the outside world the people of the state were able to grasp and react to the changes in the society irrespective of the nature of change in different sectors of life. The condition of women is much better than many other fellow states of the country. Higher education possibilities, high rate of literacy and political awareness, low infant mortality rates, sex ratio and empowerment opportunities make the



state peculiar. But the challenges of patriarchy, religious fundamentalism and caste consciousness prevalent in Kerala society result in the discrimination and marginalisation of women.

Malabar Intersection

Since the poet is from a peculiar or controversial area called Malabar which is having significant role both in the colonial and postcolonial Indian atmosphere the regional significance also plays a major role in the lives of women. “The colonial state and patriarchy often worked hand in hand...” (Sangari and Vaid 1). Kamala Das, being the epitome of women who express their self from the significant space called Malabar, points out different factors which affected the lives of women in the Malabar region. Malabar is region in the northern Kerala consisting of about six districts starting from Malappuram to Kasaragod. The region is famous for its flora and fauna which attracted people from different parts of the country and the world towards it. It was the Arab traders who first landed on the coast of Malabar. The Arab traders landed on the Malabar Coast in search of the invaluable spices, especially the black pepper, which was abundant and cheap in Malabar. The Arab traders were in search of pepper and other spices, which they sold to the European countries. They made profit out of it, which was the main source of income for the Arab traders. Along with the trade relationships, Arabs established cultural relationship with the Malabar Coast and they engaged in family relationships. Temporary marriages which are famously called as Arabi marriages were popular in the region (Mohammed 86). Not only gender but also caste, linguistic significance, religious fundamentalism and geographical peculiarities troubled the normal flow of life of the women in the Malabar region. The writings of Kamala Das come to the limelight of mainstream discussions when the women in Malabar were suppressed by the different agents of patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, caste discrimination and language fanaticism. “It is a part of the strength of Kamala Das’s exploration of love-theme that it also follows her compulsions to articulate and understand the workings of the feminine consciousness” (Kohli 188).

The very first line of the poem signifies the political atmosphere in the Malabar region and the reactions of the women in the region towards the political changes and impulses in the region. “Women have used writing as a space of protest, subversion, and creativity” (Tharu and Lalita xxi). When Kamala Das was pursuing her literary sojourn the women in Malabar region were not exposed to the mainstream political parties and the political arena was the monopoly of the men in the region. But she tells that because of her



education and exposure to the world she is able to realise the changes happening in the society and in the political atmosphere. She is not well aware of the actions and behaviours of the political leaders who is trying to corrupt and exploited the people in the society in the name of welfare and development. Though she doesn't want to criticise leaders, she tells that she is aware of the happenings in the political atmosphere and the message is that the women in the society has also begun showing attention towards the political happenings and it is a warning to the mainstream politicians that they can't no more avoid the majority of women in the region. She opens the poem with the lines:

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. (1-3)

Kamala Das is pointing to politics and expressing her attitude and reactions towards the politics from a specific region- the region which was turbulent against the political exploitation of the colonial powers and the exploitative feudalism and the landlord politics. The Malabar region also gave birth to different exuberant political organisations and movements and contributed many exemplary leaders to the politically vibrant soil of Kerala. After posting the reaction towards politics she moves forward to establish her identity and to introduce the identity of the women psyche towards the readers and critics. The lines which express the identity of the poet speaks to the reader that women from the politically backward region can also speak about herself and thereby she establishes her identity speaking about her complexion, her regional significance and her proficiency in language. She tells:

I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. (4-6)

This simple line is powerful enough to express the national identity, the racial significance and the regional identity. The proficiency of the women in the region in the aspect of language is also proclaimed. She puts forth the main significance of women in the region that she can dream about her future and her mental manifestations. The expressions of Kamala Das in these lines reminds us the specific time in the



Malabar region were they were not considered as the Indians because of the region's anticolonial resistance and were discarded only because of their racial significance as they were brown and black.

Linguistic significance also plays a peculiar role in the region. As she is from Kerala she speaks the mother tongue Malayalam and she is having proficiency in English language. She writes her poetry in English language, speaks Malayalam and writes in Malayalam when she is approaching fiction. But the language of dreams is universal for everyone. While most of the linguistic exponents and conventional theorists point out that all dream in their mother tongue, she never discloses the language of her dream and tells that the language of dream is one. The region of Malabar was having significance in the linguistic aspect as they created their own language for communication in the fight against the colonial powers. As they realised that the Malayalam and Arabic language were vulnerable enough to break the confidentiality of anticolonial resistance and the movements against the British Empire they created their own language combining the Malayalam and Arabic traditions called the Arabi-Malayalam language. The language was peculiar with Arabic font and Malayalam pronunciation so. So when Kamala Das points to the linguistics aspects in the region and the influence of language the significance of anticolonial struggle also comes to limelight.

But the region was peculiar with the atrocities of religious fundamentalism were the women were not allowed to educate themselves and they were confined to the religious education and the specific institutions or they were home-schooled by specific masters and tutors. "Women's roles were defined primarily through their familial responsibilities" (Bhattacharya 12). Kamala Das was also home-schooled because of the caste supremacy, dogmas and religious fundamentalist aspects existed in the society. But she could break the rules and norms set by the conventional social powers and could attain different laurels of higher education in her life which helped her to express the inner psyche through different languages. The linguistic dogmas and norms set by the language monopolisers and the linguistic fanatics attacks her literary creative endeavour as she expresses her condition through the lines: 'Don't write in English, they said, English is/ Not your mother-tongue' (7-8). Kamala Das is pointing to the linguistic oppression towards the choice of language in her writing.

The language of women in Malabar were a controversial issue that they were not allowed to educate, learn the literature or language they like. The religious fundamentalist and caste discrimination agents

victimises the Malabar women as they were neglected in the chances and opportunities for education and language learning. They were not allowed to expose themselves in the mainstream society, the ceremonies rituals and festivities were mainstream men were having the monopoly. Though Kamala Das belonged to the higher caste, the atrocities of the caste were in front of her as her neighbours and the fellow mates were suppressed based on their caste status. “Educated women in Kerala, particularly from the upper castes, often encountered a contradictory existence” (Devika 14). But to all these methods for suppression towards the creative mind of Kamala Das she raises her voice and protests against all these agents of suppression through her voice. When the linguistic politics tells her to stick on to a specific language for her creative expression she tells that it is her own choice to select the language for her expression both in spoken and language and tells everyone to leave her alone to have the freedom of choice and expression.

Why not leave

Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone.

Through these lines Kamala Das shares her authority over the language. So the women in the region who were kept away from the benefits of education and learning establish the authority over the process of learning and the language used by them. Thus the identity of women in the region is established through the words of Kamala Das as she wants to create her own identity through the language spoken and through the words and expressions in the form of poetry and spoken language.

The agents of oppression works in the woman in Malabar region through different factors like caste, regional aspects, linguistic aspects and patriarchal agents. She ‘...questions the sexual aspect of marriage...’ and proclaims her identity liberating from the clutches of patriarchy caste discrimination, linguistic fanaticism and the regional constraints (Nayar 118). She openly shouts at the suppressive agents telling: ‘It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest, / It is as human as I am human, don't/ You see?’ These lines establishes her identity and she tries to create her existence as a human being and questions the



superiority agents which compelled the women in the society to subdue to suppressive agents. She tells that she is half Indian. It means that she is an Indian by identity but she is not allowed with all the provisions all the rights which are given for the priority citizens as she is suppressed by different agents of caste, patriarchy and religious fundamentalism. She questions the suppressive agents by pointing out to her human existence. This proclamation of the human existence in women is a reply to the controversial discussions happened in the European continent where the intellectuals and thinkers in the 17th century discussed matters to confirm the presence of soul in the woman's body. But "The woman's body becomes a contested site for cultural and religious control" (Ahmed-Ghosh 117). While the Europeans were discussing of the matters regarding woman whether to consider them as human beings in the 17th century, Indians were discussing of considering the lower caste women as inferior to animals which work in the fields and other household works. So as a response to these conditions in the past Kamala Das establishes the woman identity by proclaiming her free existence as a human being. "Crossing linguistic and cultural thresholds, women writers carve out new narrative spaces" (Lal 11).

Kamala Das points to the different voices of oppression women in the household faces as a result of the norms and rules established by the patriarchal society. The closest relations and companions become the agents of patriarchal norms to mould the women based on the main chauvinistic models. The voices of the oppressors both in the form of patriarchy and religious fundamentalism told Kamala Das all the women in Malabar region to

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. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-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.
Don't play at schizophrenia or be a



Nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love ...

According to A.N. Dwivedi:

The frequency of love theme may evoke repudiation from nuns and spinsters, and breed boredom in the minds of general readers, but like Sappho in Greek literature, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning in English letters, and like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath in modern American poetry, Mrs Das offers us a feast of vivid images of love couched in felicitous language. No doubt, love is her 'forte' in poetry.

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