Introduction to the Author:

Muhamed Riyaz is a student of MA in English literature at Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi. He is an expert in many languages other than English. He has completed his graduations in English literature and Islamic studies.

Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Poetry of Kamala Das

Kamala Das is one of the prominent figure in the history of Indian English poetry. As a bilingual Indian English post-independent and post-colonial poet, she was an iconoclast protested against the discrimination to women, and hegemonic position of male over female was staunchly attacked in her all works, mapping out the story of marginalized, subaltern category of society and heralding new birth for downtrodden sect of the society as she was reckoned as harbinger of post-colonial feminism in Indian context. While pre-independence women poets of India, depicted a romanticized perspective of woman, which was borrowed from western style writing, Das’s prioritization was for the subordinate category. She was depicting the whole canvass of her life which she experienced, she expressed it as quest for true love and quest for identity, demonstrated her agony and frustration. She was expressing her story as the story of entire women in the world. We can term her poems as poem of Experience whereas Naidu’s poem of Innocence.

As a counter discourse to male-centric parameters, feminism interrogates dominant patriarchal ideologies and seeks space for women as potent forces in social configuration. Although the feminism is political construct, it has been the main factor of postcolonial discourse. While Feminism in West grown up in a different matrix, it reshaped with its whole power in a distinct style in Indian context which opened huge debate all over the world.

---

1 Anisur Rahman, *Contextualizing Kamala Das, DQR English Literary Journal*
Broadly speaking, there are two different kinds of feminism; Postcolonial feminism and western feminism. Kamala Das was the advocate of the former one. Although it is difficult to generalize about postcolonial feminism, we can foreground Third World women as a broad category, within which we can explore the histories and struggles of postcolonial women against colonialism, racism, sexism and economic forces. Western feminists was only argued to widen their sphere of political independence for women while post-colonial feminists reclaimed their history by explaining their stories and struggles for survival in this problem-stricken world.

In the entire history of the world, whether it is colonial or post-colonial era, Female society has been the marginalized and subordinated by the dominant power of male. Poet might have experienced same situation under patriarchal dominance in Malabar, where from the poet hails. Using the satirical style or explicit mode of poem writing, the poet has unequivocally expounded every issues related with gender, class, caste, tradition through her entire poems

Actually the poet represents whole Indian women in general and herself in particular, whose actual value and symbolic value has been marginalized by man. Every Indian community follows the patriarchal system of dominance where the male will be the superior loaded with whole reputations and high respected status in society, whereas the women considered as inferior to man, deprived of rights even the right for living, speech, expression. Only they are supposed to be subservient for their husband, always to be in the control of a male. Similar happenings faced by Kamala Das. Her pains and agony expressed through her poems don’t represent herself only, but it inwardly speaks of the plight, and pathetic condition of an Indian wife or woman.

Kamala looks very determined to revolt against the conventional society’s definition of womanhood. Even she challenges the traditional sex-roles. In many of her poems, she brings out the emotional emptiness and sterility of 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.¹

³Depiction of Women’s Dilemmas in Select Poems of Kamala Das: A Review, Mohammad Shaukat Ansari,
Kamala Das is utterly stands opposite to the exploitation of everything, mind or body. She shows her hatred against dominance of one on another. She has felt her body as burden, so she wanted freedom of all this bondage. She wanted a ‘boyish freedom’ as of Savitiri in her period. She expressed her ambition to put on trousers and male dress style as she said in her poem:

I wore a shirt and my
Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness

(An Introduction)

Perspectives of Anisur Rahman utterly stand against the generalization of calling Kamala Das as a Feminist poet, and her poems as Feminist poems. Das was not an extreme feminist because she has longing and yearning of true loving male partner in her life, she must be known about the power of men, and she cannot think about a world without men’s dominance. She agrees her as woman in its nature. We can see her ability to merge between and post colonialism which helps to go through more symbols and images, as Enuice De Souza opined she mapped out a stage of level or post colonial woman in all ways whether it be cultural, social or linguistic. “Das’ feminism, for lack of a less loaded word, may thus be sought better in a postcolonial context as she seeks space for the marginalized female, and interrogates Indian patriarchal structures of power”.

Indianness, as post-colonial woman poet, was main feature of Das writing. Always she preferred indianized version of English in her poems As Bruce King says:

Kamala Das’s most remarkable achievement is writing an Indian English. Often her vocabulary, idioms, choice of words and some syntactical construction are part of what has been termed the Indianization of English. This is an accomplishment. It is important in the development of the national literature that writers free themselves from the linguistics standard of their colonizers and create a literature based on local speech. This is especially important for woman writers.

---

4 Anisur Rahman, Contextualizing Kamala Das pg. 196
5 Bruce Alvin King (1987), Modern Indian Poetry in English, (rev.ed.1992), New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Pg. 153
Through the poem, Kamala Das made clear that necessity of using Indian variety of English, she expressed this perspective with all kind of courage of a woman Indianizing the more words in English. She seemed as if exact imitation of British language would pave the way new colonial mindset as ,’ asserted the sixteenth century Spanish grammarian Nebrija. Language has always been the companion of empire.

As she says in the poem:

I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins.
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language 1 like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human...

(Introduction)

She enjoyed and celebrated indianness and dark complexion, while he proclaimed that she writes in her own language, language mixed with Indian culture. She asserted she does distortion in her using of English, makes it to indianized version of English adding words that facilitate her to express regional consciousness and national awareness.

Regarding the womanity in her poems we would find different kinds of opinions. Anisur Rahman reinforces this view when he comments that —she views the male body as an agent of corruption and also —regards it as a symbol of corrosion, the destroyer of female chastity and

---

6 Indian English Poetry, Anthology, Collection of selected poems Macmillan Publications
7 Anisur Rahman is professor at Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, author of Expressive form in Poetry of Kamala Das, Abhinav Publications.
this image is the result of the constant suffering which she experiences throughout her life." Dr. Dipti Mahanta says:

Kamala Das has never declared herself a feminist writer, but judged from the subversive way in which she highlights woman-centred issues, most pertinent to the Indian context, her autobiography is undeniably a feminist confessional text. Confession in Kamala Das symbolizes a private assertion of freedom that challenges rather than simply conforms to existing social norm.

Racial discrimination against specific class or particular gender, was main focus of Das, which dismantled such anomalies while she described real fact behind some political and social issues. Coming from black Dravidian community, she came to know racial discrimination as Aryans and non-Aryans. During her visit in Srilanka happened to experience conflict between Sinhala-Tamil, which was racial conflict. She has begun resisting this discrimination throughout her poems like ‘Smoke in Colombo’ and ‘A certain defect in Blood’.

Kamala Das’ My story explores the social background Nair community, through its concept on gender and caste, which prevailed all through Kerala. She had raised her voice against dominant hegemony of male over female who are suppressed, oppressed, and repressed under some unpleasant practices of Kerala Nairs. As opposing the superiority of patriarchy, she expressed her condemn and advocated her thoughts by writing her life with frankness. Das through her narrative, emphasized the freedom of women, and resisted for its getting in every nooks of her writings. We can say that she got her aims achieved in Kerala which supported caste and gender in pre-independent period of India.

Confession became the distinctive feature of Kamala Das poems. Confessional poetry came to be associated with the American poets W.D. Snodgrass and Robert Lowell who published their volumes of poetry Heart’s Needle and LifeStudies respectively in 1959. Others who joined this mode of writing were John Berryman and Theodore Roethke, and two women poets – Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Kamala Das cannot be compared simply with those

8ShubhiBhasin and PallaviSrivastava, Pragmatic Analysis of Kamala Das Poetry, IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 8, Issue 2 (Jan. - Feb. 2013). Unfortunately I couldn’t access to original source of this comment

9Assistant Professor, Department of Foreign Language, Mahachulalongkornraj University, Khonkaen Campus

10Dr. Dipti Mahanta, Kamala Das’s My Story: A Critical Perspective
confessional poets in America because they wrote about themselves out of the pressure caused from America’s culture and background and in the case of Kamala, she did not have such different milieu. So Das can be compared with Bhakti poets, as Anisur Rahman asserts in his article.

Kamala Das has cultivated a poetic style – conversational, colloquial, fluent and graceful, which fits in the confessional nature of her poetry. Using the word ‘I’ in most of her poems, she expressed the self, into extent of what she wanted to reveal it. She indulges in self-awareness, self-exploration and Self-introspection in order to define herself poetically. She finds herself condemned to play the part, apart from her feminine self. Nikita, analyzer of Das poems says:

Kamala das is also a confessional poet, who struggles to relate the private experiences with the outer world. Confessional poets deal in their poetry with personal emotional experiences which are generally considered as taboo. There is rootless self analysis and a tone of utter sincerity. What a confessional poet gives us is the psychological equivalent for his or her mental stage and it is such psychological equivalent that we always get in the poetry of Kamala das.

Quest for true love inculcates in the poems of Das. She was totally deprived of true love in her life. Love acquires a broader meaning in her poetry; it is a principle of living and of divine sustenance. It goes beyond the stereotypical male-female syndrome, embraces a larger humanity, and incorporates greater human sympathies. Everyone criticizes Kamala Das and blames her as poet of sex and eroticism; they didn’t know the reality and inward meanings of her poetry. Actually she yearned for true and genuine love. Her poetry was not of celebrating the sexual and erotic love. In an era where no one thought about this like frank expressions of bodily things, and where there was sanctified and sacred cultural milieu, she dared to do so, not because for jubilation of flesh and lust, but for agony for true love.

---

12Tawhida Akhter, Kamala Das: The Voice Of Indian Woman’s Quest For Liberation, International Journal of Innovative Research and Development, May 2013, pg. 1629, ISSN: 2278 – 0211 (Online)
14Anisur Rahman, Contextualizing Kamala Das pg. 188
Voice of protest and resistance sounded from lines of post-colonial feminist writer. Kamala Das ventured with an endeavor to alter and change stereotypical way and introducing new mode of thoughts and ideas on liberation, sexuality, woman self and identity. Though Das seemed to introduce new way of frank and open minded writing, actually it was not beginning new culture, but only it was imitating the old traditions of Vedic scripture which tell the stories of resistance, rebellion, disappointment and repression.

Das, in her life, witnessed two kinds of colonialism: British imperialism and patriarchal hegemony. Her poetry wanted to deconstruct the whole asserted norms prevalent in both colonial phases. Her poetry was the deconstruction of established things in the socio-political scenario of India. She attacked patriarchal dominion and British imperialism as local female fellow speaking against colonizers in her tongue and scribbled poem for empowerment of marginalized sect. It is quite obvious from her lines: Wipe out the paints, unmould the clay/ Let nothing remain of that yesterday. (Wipe out 1-2)

There are more poets like Dilip Chitre, Amrit Gangar and Kusum Gokarn, they expressed their sympathies and protested for the right of the downtrodden and subordinated sects of community. The voice of Kamala Das is also stronger than any other poet of protest who says:

‘Tomorrow they may bind me with chains stronger than
Those of my cowardice, rape me with bayonets
And Hang me for my doubts’ 15.

Motherhood and homeliness got a space in some poems of Das. Some poems has under the deceptive apparel of almost jingoistic feminism, a core of intense emotionality converging on domesticity and motherhood, amply reflected in such exquisite creations as ‘Jaisurya’, "Afterwards", "Requiem for a Son". 16 Das frankly talked about home expressing the condition of expats, immigrants and Diasporic writers because they think home as kind of load which cannot be carry by them. She has a poem titled 'Home is a Concept' in which above mentioned issue are described precisely in a poetic manner.

16 Comparison between Balamani Amma, and Kamala Das poems, pg 232
Hybridity, which is an important hallmark of post colonialism suggested by Homi Bhabha, is very palpable in the writings of Das, born to Kerala Hindu Nair family, whose connection networked with English colonizers socially and culturally. Her mother Balamani Amma’s parents were under the influence of colonizers. Even Das brought up in loving English from her early childhood. So Kamala Das mixed up both English and Indian culture in her poems because of her instinct taste in English, the colonizer’s tongue.

The poem ‘Introduction’ sets a good background of her consciousness about her ‘third world identity’ as Babha suggested the theory of Third world space. Das was jubilating her indianness in her poems, actually she was having solace in coinings herself as subaltern litterateur. She used her audacity to argue soundly for marginalized, subordinate, subjugated and downtrodden society. More than every postcolonial writer Das could do it effectively in her simple and lucid poetic works.

Amount of her poems replete with the sense of nationality and national identity, which indicated the complete extermination of western ideas and power in every aspects of life. A look into the title Summer in Calcutta, it creates different ideas in our minds, that was intended by Das. She tried to convey the inner meanings of Summer in Calcutta which hinting at distinctiveness from other summer season other than Indian summer. Das wanted to depict it and Indian summer was brought to light, as west hated this kind of summer. This is what Spivak suggested by the term ‘Strategic essentialism’.

Das approached Text, and adopted some style of writing like ‘technique of dislocation” and use of fragmentation. In his book, ‘the Text, the world, the critic’ Edward Said asserts that “texts are worldly”, which tell about text may be root in social facts of nowadays world issue. Thorough looking to Kamala Das’s poems, she is also talking about contemporary world life. Actually she was depicting the plight of woman in our time.

Usage of this dislocation helps the poet to make her poetry very near to common people’s talk which brims with its spontaneity, repetition of some focused words. Fragmentation can be defined as omission of important units of sentence and leaves it to the

---

17Dislocation: by this term I don’t mean the term dislocation the term found in the postcolonial studies which means displacement. On the other hand, for example, fixing the prepositional phrase in places other than after the head and by placing the adverbial phrase before the verb phrase, this can be coined as Technique of dislocation.
mind of read to appreciate and comprehend it. It is found that in poems of Das, the plentiful ‘gaps’ and ‘intermediate elements’ used in her almost poems. So it shows that she has left something left to reader to interpret it and understand it in his own way.

Irony and insinuation are the hallmark of postmodern Indian English poet. Most of her poems literally talks using the objects in nature and daily life, but at the same it has various inner meaning or bit of irony lies in it. For example, when Kamala Das strive for women’s rights in patriarchial society, The Stoge Age, a poem in which men are resembled with ‘Old Spat Spider’ in an ironical tone and demonstrated nexus of husband-wife with a kind of irony in it. There are other such like poems, as Sunita Rana says that:

The dance of the eunuchs is a dance of the sterile, and therefore, the unfulfilled and unquenchable love of the woman in the poet. In The Freaks too the theme is the same. “In the hands of Kamala Das and Sunita Jain, the poetry of protest is largely personal; in the case of Mamta Kalia and Eunice De Souza, it becomes ironical as well.”

We can categorize poetry to two different items; direct and indirect (oblique). In direct poems Kamala Das tells with frankness and without any tinge of ambiguity and she used oblique poetry to tell something using different words. This makes her some poems ironical, dual meaningful.

In a nutshell, Kamala Das succeeded in paving new path to rediscover the cause of women, exploring new arenas of poetical capabilities where obstructions in using words with frankness was not problem for her. As postcolonial feminist, Das redefined the womanhood, quest of woman. Making herself as protagonist in her poems, she argued for othered subalterns. World of poetry must have confounded of Das’s mesmerizing art of writing and simple and lucid way of expression which impressed her readers.

---

18 A concept suggested by Wolfgang Iser
Work Cited:

1. Anisur Rahman, *Contextualizing Kamala Das, DQR English Literary Journal*


5. Indian English Poetry, Anthology, Collection of selected poems Macmillan Publications


8. Dr. Dipti Mahanta, *Kamala Das’s My Story: A Critical Perspective*


10. Tawhida Akhter, Kamala Das: The Voice Of Indian Woman’s Quest For Liberation, International Journal of Innovative Research and Development, May 2013, pg. 1629, ISSN: 2278 – 0211 (Online)


