

From Ambivalence to Assertion: A Comparative Study of Kamala Das and Mamta Kalia

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1. Abstract:

Mainly this paper treats feminism as an offshoot of patriarchal oppression and domination. In this the poets have freed themselves from patriarchal 'ambivalent' hold, and made feminist assertion and liberation. This paper deals with Kamala Das and Mamta Kalia, who belong to India. The poet, Kamala Das, has expressed the subtle oppressive reality of patriarchy. Her poetry is characterized by frankness and openness. By reading her poetry we can find that how she dares to express her true feelings. Mamta Kalia's poetry speaks about the dominance of her father at home. She has talked about her father's attempt to bully her. The two poets have not only expressed their conflicts and experiences, regarding patriarchal society, but also how they have attempted to liberate themselves.

Key-Words:

Ambivalence: Having uncertain feelings about something or someone.

Assertion: Confident and forceful statement, 2. The action of asserting something.

(A) A definition for feminism:

"The belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men: the struggle to achieve this aim". [OXFORD ADVANCED LEARNER'S DICTIONARY]

2. Feminism and Literature

In a way fighting for the rights of women is feminism. Giving equal political, economic and social rights and equal opportunities for women is feminism. It is related to women and tells not only about women's issues but also women's relationship with men and vis-à-vis.

Understandably Feminism is a popular discourse in contemporary literature and it deals with the reality of women from women's perspective, more importantly.

According to Lisa S. Price, in *Feminist Frameworks: Building Theory on Violence against Women*, offers an exciting classification of the phrase: "Feminism is also a method of analysis, a standpoint, a way of looking at the world from the perspective of women. It questions government policies, popular culture, ways of doing and being, and asks how women's lives are affected by these ideological and institutional practices" (6).

The definition of feminism by Estelle B. Freedman, in *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*, contains the key elements of feminism as a cultural, social, personal and political movement for equality and freedom: “Feminism is a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies” (7).

According to Sumit Chakrabarti, “lesbian feminism is typified by the assertion of difference and a desire to break the mould of the established order of things. It challenges the celebration of reproductive motherhood and the virtues of passive femininity valorized by the patriarchal paradigm”.

Literature is expected to tell the whole truth and deal with the entire society and reflect complete reality. It shows all aspects of the journey of life, and it is the mirror of life. Then only it can be safely stated as “Mimesis” in the real sense. In case of feminist literature, women poets true to the political spirit of feminism go beyond mimesis. But a critical verification proves that sometimes the mimesis seems to be more a discourse. Accordingly the unvoiced and unrepresented began to emerge in literature. Among those unvoiced, a discourse emerged over a period of time and has acquired the nomenclature of feminism.

The emergence of feminist perspective in literature did not happen at once. It had been a fallout of the socio-economic and political, cultural changes in the society.

During the nineteenth century, women’s access to higher education increased. They used their skills to develop their art. The growth of market economies, cities, and life expectancies changed during this period. Women were more conscious of their social, legal, and political inequality. Finally, the many social reform movements led by nineteenth-century women, such as religious revivalism, abolitionism, temperance, and suffrage, gave women writers a context and a forum in which they could express their views. These movements have given an opportunity to open up their voices. While most scholars agree that many women writers accepted the separate sphere of domesticity that the age assumed of them. Women started to argue, and they began to express their feelings and opinions in their writing, their dissatisfaction with gender relations and the plight of women in general. What is the woman’s place in art and society was a subject that was hotly debated

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, women writers used to write largely about genres of children's literature and poetry. As nineteenth-century women increasingly began to write fiction, however, often derided the inferior talents of women novelists, and their lack of worldly experience.

Some modern critics have noted that at the end of the nineteenth century, women novelists were more prevalent and often more popular, than male novelists. Some critics disregard the contributions of nineteenth-century women authors.

Toward the end of the century, women writers expanded their subject matter, moving beyond highlighting the lives and hardships suffered by women in domestic prisons. They expressed their individualism and demanded for equal rights with men in the society.

3. The Three Waves of Feminism:

Elaine Showalter a famous American literary critic who has coined this three phrases or waves of feminism, in his critical essay "*Towards a feminist poetics*". According to Elaine Showalter there are three types of phrases. She classified women's writing into three phases to establish the continuity of the female tradition. The first phase from 1840-1880 is called as feminine phase by her. She declares this phase as feminine phase because women in this phase tried to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture. The second phase from 1880 to 1920 is called as feminist phase in which women rejected the male writings. Finally Showalter calls the third and final phase, the female phase, which began in 1920. In this phase women rejected both imitation and protest and turned to female experience as a source of an autonomous art.

The first wave of feminism took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It took place, because of changes in the society. There were changes due to urban industrialism, liberal and socialist politics. The main aim of this wave was to open up opportunities for women on the surface level not on the ground level. The wave formally began at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, when 300 men and women rallied to the cause of equality for women. Some told that women were morally superior to men, and so their presence in the society would improve public behavior and the political process.

The second wave began in the 1960s and continued into the 1990s. In this phase, sexuality and reproductive rights were dominant issues.

In this phase we could see the voice of women. We could observe that much of the movement's energy was focused on passing the Equal Rights Amendment to the constitution guaranteeing social equality regardless of sex. There was a rise and voice of women. In this phase we can see the basic nature of women. They have raised their voice accordingly.

Because the second wave of feminism found voice amid so many other social movements, it was easily marginalized and viewed as less pressing.

Whereas the first wave of feminism was generally propelled by middle class white women, the second phase drew in women of color and developing nations, seeking sisterhood, sharing and claiming, "Women's struggle is class struggle".

It gave priority for the development of 'women- only- spaces.' Women working together create a special dynamic that is not possible in mixed-groups and that would ultimately work for the betterment of the entire planet. Women could do works which are not possible by mixed groups. Women are believed to be kind

towards other people, they can work jointly on an activity, they can cooperate with enemies, they can do everything, care for and protect a child or young plant while they are growing and developing. And also they can assume that everyone in the society are equal, they can treat all human equally, and holistic in their approach to problem-solving than men. The term eco-feminism was coined to capture the senses that, because of their biological connection to earth and lunar cycles, women are natural advocates of environmentalism. These are the reasons which are showing the qualities of women.

The third phase of feminism began in the mid-1990s and is well-known by post-colonial and post-modern thinking. The first two phases of the movement recognized with male oppression. Third wave feminism breaks restrictions. The present poets belong to the spirit of third wave of feminism.

4. Indian Women's Poetry and the Treatment of Women:

Indian women poets in English, from Toru Dutt to Kamla Das and from Sarojini Naidu to Suniti Namjoshi, reveal the variety of themes as well as styles. That the poetry is capable of mind-boggling themes, dealing with a range of themes and generating diverse strategies of poetic expression. Each one of them has tried to speak in a different way, yet they form a collective voice asserting the autonomy of women. Women poets have often raised their voice against social and cultural conventions, which are forcing them to do something and finally carry out a bad or illegal action. Women writers assert that the creation of a community of women is necessary antidote to the excess of individualism. They believe that women need to explore their collective consciousness and share experience in order to go beyond the range or be better than the fragmentation and isolation of their lives. (Dr. Ram Sharma, 2009: online)

5. Kamala Das's Feminist Poetry: Introspective Discourse

Kamala Surayya / Suraiyya formerly known as Kamala Das, (also known as Kamala Madhavikutty, pen name was Madhavikutty) was a major Indian English poet and litterateur and at the same time a leading Malayalam author from Kerala, India.

Her open and straightforward treatment of female sexuality, free from any common sense of guilt, infused her writing with supremacy, but also marked her as an iconoclast in her generation.

Early Life

Kamala Das was born in Punnayurkulam, Thrissur District in Kerala, on March 31, 1934, to V. M. Nair, a former managing editor of the widely-circulated Malayalam daily Mathrubhumi, and Nalappatt Balamani Amma, a renowned Malayali poetess.

She spent her childhood between Calcutta, where her father was employed as a senior officer in the Walford Transport Company. Like her mother, Kamala Das also excelled in writing. Her love of poetry began at an early age through the influence of her great uncle, Nalappatt Narayana Menon, a prominent writer.

At the age of 15, she got married to bank officer Madhava Das, who encouraged her writing interests, and she started writing and publishing both in English and in Malayalam.

Das once said, "I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little" (Warrior interview).

Kamala Das writes about the worried state of womanhood in Indian society.

She writes in this way:

"I must pose,
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman
Happy wife
I must keep right distance
Between me and the low
And I must keep right distance
Between me and the high" (*The Suicide*)

Life is no bed of roses for an Indian woman. Her path is with thorns in the form of do's and don'ts!

Womanhood is a curse for them. It is expressed in the line "the weight of my breasts and womb crushed me" (*An Introduction*).

Her poem *Old Playhouse* is about patriarchal domination. In the poem a girl comes to the house of her husband with great expectations of love and happiness. Her new home soon proves to be the graveyard of her dreams. Kamala Das husband reduces her to the position of a sex- slave:

"You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your lust so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone and the home left behind her
Also her nature, the urge to fly"

These lines illustrate the fate of every girl who gets trapped into marriage. Her desire to grow, to have self-knowledge and, self- realization is crushed. She is reduced to the position of a helpless person. She is nothing more than a sex-object:

"You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny. You embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices
You called me wife"

In the suffocating environment of her new home the woman "loses her will and reason". The room is filled with the oppressive smell of "male breath". Even the cut flowers in the vase smell of human sweat. She feels herself to be a "dwarf cowering beneath the monstrous ego" of her husband.

The poem highlights how Love is what a woman wants most. Without it she will wither away like a flower plucked from its stalk. She says:

"I want to be loved
And

if love is not to be had

I want to be dead"

One can observe certain ambivalence in the protagonist's feminist anguish. Perhaps the ambivalence is inevitable because of stronghold of the patriarchy. Since the patriarchal domination has been in the familial system. It is not easy for the protagonist to realize the evil grip of man's domination. A woman's life would be lustreless without a man whose touch alone can make her "gleam like burnished brass" (*The Looking Glass*) (Vikrant Sehgal, 2012: online)

It is believed that Kamala Das's own life is the central theme of her poetry. Das is a bilingual poet. As we know her poetry is characterized by frankness, clarity and openness. She has freely expressed her views on various aspects; her poetry is about her personal and emotional experiences. Her poetry records her experiences and struggles she has to undergo in order to maintain her identity.

In this poem, Kamala Das has talked about her life--her girlhood, her fondness for English, the beginning of tension in her life, her first sexual humiliation. In this she introduces herself to us. She begins her poem by saying that she doesn't know anything about politics but she knows the names of politicians who are in power. Up to this she can tell the names of those, from beginning with Nehru. She can remember them like days of a week, or names of months. Further she addresses herself to us, she was an Indian, brown is her colour, and she hails from Malabar. And also she can speak three languages, but she can write in two only. Her friends, critics, visiting cousins told her that you shouldn't write in English, because it is not your mother-tongue. First of all she has to face the language problem. She has been advised not to use it as it was not her mother-tongue. She explains those please leave me alone, and let me speak which I would like to speak. It's my language; let me write in this language. Her poetry is speaking about her joys, her longings and her hopes.

"It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest."

Kamala das's language is useful enough for her to express her feelings, not only feelings but also to express her hunger in this poem. She is a child, and later they have told her that she has grown up. But tensions began as she grew up. There are remarkable physical changes in her body. Once she has asked for love, because she doesn't know what else to ask. She marries at an early age. Further the protagonist extends her lines by saying; my harsh cry is not like the deaf and blind speech of the tree" in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain". Her husband doesn't beat her, but her body feels like so beaten. Her life has changed a lot, when she has come to this new environment and in this "institution" of marriage. She becomes smaller and pitiful.

Kamala Das is interested to be free, and also she is interested to lead a life in better way, she likes to be a foreigner. According to the modern society she has changed her way of dressing and other things. In other words, in order to save herself from male-oriented society. There are other reasons also; she was compelled

to accept the traditional feminine role. She moulds her life accordingly. But her relatives said that you be like a girl, be a wife, be a woman, don't play any games with us with your mental disorder. It's the way the author has been instructed by them. Here the poet says not only about her lover, but also about all men. Any man wants a woman for love. But she could not find the fulfillment of love in the married life. Her experiences are the experiences of every woman. She uses to go to the hotels in the time of midnight at the towns. The protagonist is not satisfied and she is unhappy, she says "It is I who laugh; it is I who make love."

Oh, how difficult life is, she is with a rattle in her throat. She says that "I am a sinner, I am a saint, and I am the beloved and the betrayed." Due to these reasons she loses all interest in life.

"It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys that are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I."

Above lines show the sarcasm in this poetry.

Here Kamala Das expects love from their family members. But she doesn't find love in them. Their family members also expect something from Kamala Das, but she is totally different. She praises herself in one way; on the other side she doesn't praising. She has admired herself in one way, on the other side she accuses herself. She has boasted about herself and abuses herself, and also she criticizes herself.

After marriage her life has changed a lot. In this poem Kamala Das mainly speaks about truth and reality. She doesn't feel any guilt to express her feelings.

Their family members have forced her in this way to fit into given roles:

"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."

"*An Introduction*" is clearly autobiographical like most other poetry written by Kamala Das. The poetry is about the careful examination of her own thoughts, feelings and self-discovery in the mind of the author. Finally, the poem is an expression of the poet's strong desire for love and of the sense of frustration and deprivation. Here we can see the suffering of the poet for not having enough affection in the married life. These themes recur in Kamala Das's verse. It is revealing of the poet- of her political knowledge, sad

experience in married life, frustration and loneliness. We can observe the quality of her frankness and openness. The author is rebelling against all forms of activities in her life. The speaker reacts sharply by playing down her femininity. Finally the author became like assertive by overcoming the ambivalence.

6. Mamta Kalia's Feminist Poetry: Candid Discourse

Mamta Kalia is a bilingual poet. She has published only two books in English, but the first, *Tribute to papa*, was an influential one, virtually inaugurating a chatty, colloquial style which she chooses to describe as no style at all. (Eunice de Souza, 1999:66)

Nearly thirty years after they were first published, the poems remain fresh. Her first volume *Tribute to Papa And Other Poems* (1970) is ironic in tone and autobiographical in content. Through it, she gives her inner conflicts and experiences. Her title poem, "*Tribute to Papa*" is about the clash between her ideas and those of her father. The father wants his daughter to follow the traditional values .But she wants to lead a life according to the modern society. (Naziyah Nabi, 2013:online)

As she questions:

Who cares for you papa?

Who cares for your clean thoughts, clean words, clean teeth?

Who wants to be an angel like you?

Basically, the protagonist finds fault with her Papa's attempt to force idealism on her. Perhaps she is more worried about the lack of genuine feelings on the part of the father character.

"I wish you had guts, papa /
to smuggle eighty thousand watches at a stroke."

She does not mind defying the ideals of her father in order to be happy. She rejects her father's idealism as his inability and weakness:

When you can't think of doing anything

You start praying,

Spending useless hours at the temple.

She terms prayers as useless when he/she is not able to do anything. Mamta Kalia in the poem represents a modern, frank, awakened woman who dares to question, judge and even revolt against her father and his values. She wants a change in the traditional values and beliefs and is bold enough to speak against the patriarchal values and laws. Mamta Kalia seems to be frustrated and depressed at the same time dissatisfied with the given social order. So in her poems there is a cry and an inner desire to transform this society, which is denied to her. So due to her behavior, her revolt goes to the extent of disowning her father:

These days I am seriously thinking of disowning you, papa

You and your sacredness.

These lines depict her as a serious critic of patriarchy. In the Indian middle class society, daughters have a great 'responsibility' for honoring the family values and any wrong step by them can dishonor the whole

family. In a patriarchal culture daughters are emotionally compelled to sacrifice their feelings and emotions for the sake of the family. So Kalia ends the poem with an ironic cautious note as:

But I'll be careful, papa
Or I know you'll at once think of suicide.

This is the condition of every average Indian lady. So Kalia represents the collective women and gives voice to their feelings in general. In "Tribute To Papa" Kalia creates her own identity by rejecting her father's notion of "greatness" and "Indian womanhood" who are ready to die for the sake of their sons as:

You want me to be like you, papa
Or like Rani Lakshmibai
You're not sure what greatness is
But you want me to be great.

She is trying to destroy her father's beliefs and loyalties. She rejects rather revolts against her father's opinions and thoughts. It is the subversive attitude of the author. Her father's position is low at the office; even then he is not allowing his daughter to be free like him and giving importance to the society. Sometimes she is ignoring her father's behavior and she is sarcastic towards her father's arguments. Finally we can see the change in the poet's attitude that's the author became like assertive by overcoming the ambivalence.

In this poem Mamta Kalia portrays the father character in the poem. Even though the father has ambitious thoughts, he is an unsuccessful man in his personal life. May be the father's thoughts and words are not sinful but they are not practical. The protagonist explores the shallowness in the argument of the father character by pointing out: The father is pressurizing the daughter to become something else other than being herself. The father himself is not a successful person from the materialist point of view. But he wants his daughter to be an Ideal person from the materialist point of view. Here, the protagonist is exposing father's shallowness and pretention. As a typical postmodern protagonist she challenges the paternal authority in view of the latter's stifling attempt to control his daughter. The poem acquires the ironical significance as a weak and successful father figure as he doesn't hesitate to control the life of the daughter which is almost foolish. He wants his daughter to be powerful, famous as if becoming famous itself is a big achievement. As a third wave feminist the poet doesn't accept her father's authoritative role in her life. Instead she fights against her father's authoritative attitude and breaks all boundaries which do not allow her to become powerful.

Mamta Kalia gives two donkey-claps for her father and three for Rani Lakshmibai." These days I am seriously thinking of disowning you papa, you and your sacredness."

"What if I start calling you Mr Kapur, Lower
Division clerk, Accounts section?"

The poet feels for her father but she also simultaneously explores the father's authoritative attitude.

Simultaneously she has felt unhappy with her father's position. The daughter will be proud of him only when he will be in good position.

At times, Mamta Kalia seems to be critical of the father character. She tries to destroy her father's suffocating hold. There is no wrong "if I start calling you Mr Kapur, Lower Division clerk, Accounts section?"

Mamta Kalia speaks about reality and fiction in family relationship. Her father expects something in this world, but nothing has taken place. He wants to be a model man at the same time he wants his daughter to be different and extra-ordinary. Her father doesn't say anything openly as Mamta Kalia does. Perhaps Mamta Kalia's father is like many who wants their children to be different. They want as a rule their children to be successful in a materialistic way.

7. Conclusion:

A comparative analysis of these two poets indicates that protagonists have initial hesitations and arrive at the clinching assertions towards the end and there by unveil their identity. The analysis endorses the fact that coming out of the patriarchal hold does not happen without undergoing harrowing experience of ambivalence and realizing the stance of assertion. Kamala Das and Mamta Kalia both appeared to be initially in the ambivalence or in the hold/grip of patriarchy. Even though they are in hesitant situation, finally, at the end they have come to the position of an assertion. In simple they have asserted their individuality, self-respect and there by attempted at self-actualization.

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