



A Comparative Study of the Idea of Feminism in Kamala Das's *An Introduction* and Rukmini Bhaya Nair's *Kali*

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Abstract

This comparative study delves into the portrayal of feminist ideology in two poignant poems: Kamala Das's "An Introduction" and Rukmini Bhaya Nair's "Kali". Both poems are celebrated pieces of feminist literature, exploring the complex intersectionalities of gender, identity, and societal expectations. Through a close examination of linguistic choices, thematic elements, and cultural contexts, this paper seeks to unravel the nuanced representations of feminism in the works of these two renowned Indian poets.

Kamala Das, known for her bold and confessional style, confronts patriarchal norms head-on in "An Introduction." Through a deeply personal narrative, Das challenges traditional gender roles and embraces her identity with unapologetic defiance. On the other hand, Rukmini Bhaya Nair's "Kali" presents a multifaceted exploration of femininity, drawing from Hindu mythology to subvert conventional notions of female power and agency. Nair's poem navigates themes of oppression, resilience, and liberation, offering a contemporary reinterpretation of the fierce goddess Kali.

By juxtaposing these two poems, this study aims to highlight the diverse manifestations of feminist thought within Indian literature. Through comparative analysis, it illuminates the distinct voices and strategies employed by Das and Nair in their respective poetic endeavours. Furthermore, this research

underscores the relevance of these works in shaping conversations surrounding gender equality and empowerment in contemporary society, both within India and on a global scale.

The idea that women should have equal access to social, economic, and political freedoms is known as feminism. It also involves altering the way that people view the rights of men and women. Around the globe, feminism is embodied and represented by a number of organizations dedicated to promoting the rights and interests of women. The world considers women as inferior and men as superior. Therefore, the feminist theory tool aimed to fight for women's freedom. It centered on women's ardent struggle to attain equality and identity. When we analyse the trajectory of feminism in India, it is evident that feminism is aimed at gender equality. The media and female writers were the leading promoters of feminism which fought for the equal opportunities of women. Today, feminism has splintered into different areas. These days women are portrayed as strong protagonists who powerfully fight against patriarchal norms. A shift in women's ideology can also be traced to the passage of time. In many places, women are still expected to be in the domestic sphere.

Literary feminism deals with cultural, economic, social, and educational inequalities undergone by women in a patriarchal society. A feminist reading of a text focuses on critiquing the patriarchal or male-centered language and resisting conventional thoughts that marginalize women. It also challenges traditional and cultural stereotypes. A feminist text is characterized by the explicit feminist ideologies it displays. According to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a feminist is a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes (We Should All Be Feminists 15). She emphasizes the core principle of equality in feminism and this quotation encapsulates the fundamental belief that feminism is not about female supremacy but about striving for justice and equity for all genders. Women entangled in the struggle of abuse, humiliation, repression, and dependency are projected through the medium of literature. Therefore, feminism has quickly become a crucial ideology that constitutes a significant part of contemporary writing in English.

Women's writing has become a 'paradigm of resistance'. It puts on effort to show the quality of strength in a female. According to Maya Angelou "Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women" (nytimes.com). Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One's Own* (1929), mentions: "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind" (47). Woolf's quotation embodies the spirit of resistance inherent in women's writing, asserting the irrepressible nature of women's creative expression and intellectual freedom. Audre Lorde says, "I write for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they were so terrified because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves" (*Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* 40). Lorde's quotation emphasizes the transformative power of women's writing in giving voice to the silenced and marginalized. By refusing to be silenced by fear or societal expectations, women writers reclaim their agency and use their voices to challenge oppression and advocate for change.

Kamala Das is a renowned poet and writer of female sensibility. She is best known for her honest writings on female sexuality and the journey of being a woman. She is widely regarded as the mother of modern English poetry for her extensive contribution to the poetry canon. She is also best known for her autobiography *My Story*. In her autobiography, she has perfectly portrayed the predicaments, desires, and exploitation faced by women.

She focused on writing confessional poetry. Her confessional style of feminist poetry is widely known as poetry of protest. According to Anna Sujatha Mathai in "The Poetics of Self and Otherness in Kamala Das's Poetry", Kamala Das's confessional poetry challenges conventional notions of femininity and patriarchy. According to other critics of Das's poetry, she uses confessional poetry to unveil the deceitfulness of society. Her popular poetic collection includes *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *Collected Poems- I* (1984), *The Best of Kamala Das* (1991), and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996).

She chiefly wrote on love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. Indian readers responded sympathetically to her guileless frankness concerning sexual matters. She was a victim of patriarchal detriments and discrimination as most women are. Her poems are exceptional because they reveal her feelings of anxiety, alienation, meaninglessness, an acute sense of isolation, and loss of identity. Modern Indian women's ambivalence is presented through her poems.

In the introductory chapter to her *Collected Poems*, Kamala Das acknowledges the societal expectation of how women should write and what they should write about, reflecting the ambivalence of conforming to traditional gender roles while seeking to assert her own voice and experiences as a woman. "I have written/as women write, about women/or rather, what men/say about women/and their ways of loving" (xi). In *The Descendants* she says, "I stand alone, stretching my arms till they ache. / No voice sings to me, nor do I sing to anyone" (44). This excerpt conveys a sense of isolation and introspection experienced by the speaker, symbolizing the ambivalence of modern Indian women who may sense a feeling of being disconnected from traditional roles and expectations but also uncertain about forging new paths and identities.

"An Introduction" (1965) is a powerful autobiographical poem by Kamala Das. It was published as a part of her poetry collection *Summer in Calcutta* (1965). It is a powerful expression of resentment. In the poem, Kamala Das detests traditional sex roles assigned to women by the patriarchal society and resists finding total fulfillment in submissive domesticity. According to Eunice de Souza, the poem "An Introduction" can be read as a statement of resentment. It also reveals a complex negotiation between tradition and modernity, desire and restraint (*Early Indian Poetry in English: Critical Essays* edited by Makarand R. Paranjape). The poem presents the speaker as an Indian poet and an ordinary Indian woman. At the beginning of the poem, an innocent girl is being portrayed. The transition of a woman's life is also seen in the poem. It describes the process of growing up. The adolescent hermaphroditic instincts, which initiate the quest for identity, are depicted as a rebellion of womanliness. In the poem, the speaker decisively selects her path as both a poet and a woman, rejecting the counsel of critics, friends, and family. She completely disregards the expectations of society towards a woman. Her freedom is being threatened by society. They criticize her aspiration to be a multilingual writer. The artistic self takes precedence over the

domestic one. The speaker surprises her conventional relatives and the conformist society with her unfeminine behavior. The poet persona says:

I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short, and ignored
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. (*Summer in Calcutta*, 62)

As the female body subjugates the speaker with its unwanted femaleness, she desires to disregard her sexual identity. She also refuses to heed the advice of the categorizers who cage women in traditional roles. Das's skill in transforming everyday occurrences into poetry is apparent in the poem. The narrator's voice changes from an Indian woman poet to 'every woman she seeks love' in the poem. She dissolves all dichotomies on behalf of the feminine gender. "An Introduction" is an assertion of identity and a rejection of patriarchal structures that seek to confine and control women. The rejection of societal constraints aligns with the theme of resentment towards imposed limitations. The concluding lines of the poem depict the poet's quest for autonomy and identity. The poet Kamala Das partakes the same joys and miseries as that of the community and shares the same fate and the same crumbled dreams.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair is an eminent linguist, poet, and critic who works as a Professor of Linguistics and English at the Indian Institute of Technology. She is called the "first significant Post-modern poet in Indian English". She has published three volumes of poetry: *The Hyoid Bone* (1992), *The Ayodhya Cantos* (1999), *Yellow Hibiscus: New and Selected Poems* (2004). She won the First Prize in the All-India Poetry Competition in 1990 organized by The Poetry Society (India) in collaboration with the British Council for her poem "Kali". She is a staunch critic of Hindutva ideology and the religious and caste discrimination it promotes.

Reviewing her poetry in *Outlook India*, Kamala Das had written:

Good poetry makes of me a bloody fool. Rukmini Bhaya Nair's latest book of poems affected me much the same way. I wept. A fine poet, seasoned smooth, Rukmini's *Yellow Hibiscus: New and Selected Poems* reveals the grandeur of her verse. Honed at the serrated edges of two cultures quite dissimilar, Rukmini's poetry cannot lie idle in "the tranquil square of the senses" but must disturb...Then the question gains significance. Is poetry by its very nature meant to disturb? (outlookinda.com)

The prominent themes of Nair's poetry include the plight of women, the re-visiting of myth and religion. Critics appreciate her ability to infuse ancient myths with contemporary relevance, offering fresh perspectives on timeless stories and symbols.

"Kali" (1990) is considered the jewel in contemporary Indian poetry. It was published in her poetry collection *Yellow Hibiscus: New and Selected Poems* (2004). It is a poem on the Goddess Kali in Hindu mythology who symbolizes destruction and creation. It is a bold re-working of the myth of the goddess Kali where she is de-mystified by the poet. In Nair's poetry gods are not sacred and divine. They are ordinary and fallible. Similarly, in the poem the poet describes the Goddess Kali, as a woman, a lonely woman, her tantrums, and her equation with her son Ganesha and consort Shiva. Nair encapsulates Kali's resentment at being venerated all the time. She portrayed the goddess as an ordinary woman who is completely exhausted from eliminating evils. Here, Shiva is not portrayed as an ascetic but as somebody interested in apsaras. She is driven mad by her loneliness. She does not want the 'god' Shiva but someone mortal as her companion. The poet says:

Kali desires a mortal, whose day
Begins with her, ends at nightfall
In her arms, a man who will die
Without her, whose love is fallible
But secure, she wants to be held

Like a warm creature, not a fable. (poemhunter.com)

She shows the bodily desire of an ordinary woman. Her strong desire to seek comfort in mortality represents the mundane life she leads. She wants to get rid of the bondages that are laid by the patriarchal society on women. She longs for love and care from her loved ones. Instead, they gift her an eagle and expect her to find satisfaction and happiness in its company. Ganesha, her son, also tries to find her flaws and criticizes her. He is a microcosm of a patriarchal society that cannot accept mistakes from women. The poem concludes with the image of Kali who is melancholic and disheartened. The mythical elements in the poem make it a manifestation of oppression and exploitation experienced by women in society. It perfectly articulates the feminine sensibility and its concealment in a male dominated society.

The texts "An Introduction" by Kamala Das and "Kali" by Rukmini Bhaya Nair embody female sensibility. It showcases how a woman had to perish under the pressure of blind patriarchy. In the poem "An Introduction" the speaker is a non-conformist Indian woman poet who challenges patriarchal ideas of femininity and refuses to conform to societal expectations, rejecting the role of a trapped housewife. Society restricts her from aspiring to her goals as a writer. The reason behind the use of pseudo-names for writing by women can be because of the mentality of men. The female body suppresses the speaker with its unwanted femaleness, she desires to disregard her sexual identity. The poet persona is in anguish. This indignation develops mainly from a man's reluctance to recognize a woman as an intellectual equal, a companion who can enrich his life and give it purpose.

The goddess in the poem “Kali” represents the emotions and feelings of an ordinary woman who experiences an identity crisis. She is outwardly the goddess but inwardly a woman who longs for the love of a mere mortal. She undergoes loneliness and frustration. The male-dominated society fails to understand whether women are happy and what they wish to do. Kali is honestly voicing her longings. She is on a quest for true love. If a myth is reconfigured, patterns of oppression, suppression, and idealism can be observed closely. Society cleverly restrains women from expressing themselves. Both poems firmly express women speakers’ needs in a male-dominated society. They are examples of bold pleading for feminism which display strong feminist ethos. They fight against the patriarchal code of conduct.

In the contemporary scenario, women are trapped in marriages or other bondages which do not allow them to freely bloom. They are expected to be caged birds. Man-made world compels them to be in the domestic sphere being voiceless without any wishes and complaints. It is seen that women are highly exploited in every sphere of society. The women, in the roles of wives, have to obey their husbands and be subservient to them. According to Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar-

Women’s duties as good daughters, good wives, and good mothers are well-defined in the Indian patriarchal society. Wifehood and motherhood are accepted as pivotal roles for women: by implication, these roles complete in themselves and women need not pursue any specialised discipline of knowledge, art or profession. (*Women in Indian Society*, 1)

This stereotypical portrayal of Indian women has been analyzed, questioned, replaced, and given newer dimensions through feminist texts to an extent. There has been a shift from women being portrayed as weak, dull, and submissive in literature because of the advent of feminist writers. It has definitely made an attempt to reveal the biases, prejudices, and assumptions about feminine gender.

The idea of feminism in the poems of Kamala Das and Rukmini Bhaya Nair differs significantly due to their unique perspectives, styles, and thematic focuses. Kamala Das's poetry is marked by its confessional style, deeply personal and emotional. Her feminist perspective is rooted in her own

experiences as a woman, and she boldly explores themes of female sexuality, identity, and the constraints imposed by societal norms. Das challenges patriarchal structures by discussing her desires and vulnerabilities openly, which was groundbreaking in her cultural context. Her work emphasizes the importance of personal liberation and the right to self-expression, making a powerful statement against the suppression of women's voices.

In contrast, Rukmini Bhaya Nair's poetry is more intellectual and theoretical, reflecting her academic background. Nair's feminist approach often interrogates the language and structures that perpetuate gender inequality. She deconstructs linguistic norms and explores how language shapes female identity and experience. Nair's work also engages with broader cultural and political issues, linking individual experiences to societal and global contexts. Her use of symbolism and metaphor adds complexity, requiring readers to delve deeper into her critiques of power and gender dynamics.

While Das's feminism is intensely personal and confessional, focusing on emotional and sexual liberation, Nair's feminism is analytical and critical, focusing on deconstructing the linguistic and cultural frameworks that sustain gender inequality. Das uses her personal narrative to highlight universal themes, whereas Nair employs theoretical frameworks to offer a broader critique. Their differing approaches reflect the diversity within feminist thought, each contributing valuable insights into the understanding and articulation of women's experiences.

Feminist writings play a crucial role in evolving ideas of equity, identity, and femininity in a world that grapples with various gender issues, including homophobia, LGBTQ concerns, and other intersecting forms of oppression. Feminist writings interrogate traditional notions of femininity, reclaiming and redefining the concept in ways that empower individuals of all gender identities. By challenging gender norms and expectations, feminist authors like Kamala Das and Rukmini Bhaya Nair have dismantled restrictive stereotypes and offered alternative visions of femininity that prioritize autonomy, agency, and authenticity through their poems. Despite being from different generations, Das and Nair address women's enduring struggles, reflecting how women's plight has persisted over time. This emphasizes the deep-rooted nature of gender inequality and the ongoing relevance of feminist themes in literature.

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