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Celebrating Transcendence And Transformation In Kalki Subramanian's *Selected Poems*

1Maheswari S, 2Dr.Madhuramozhi V

1Student, 2Assistant Professor of English

1Dr.N.G.P Arts and Science College, Coimbatore,

2Dr.N.G.P Arts and Science College, Coimbatore

Abstract

Kalki Subramanian, a renowned transgender activist, poet, and artist, uses her poetry as a powerful medium for self-expression and activism. This paper critically examines three of her notable poems—*She, Don't Tell That to Me*, *A Little Girl and Me*, and *Clap Aloud*—to explore themes of identity, resilience, the innocence of childhood perceptions, and societal transformation. The analysis focuses on these poems' linguistic, stylistic, and thematic elements, highlighting Kalki's distinctive voice in contemporary Indian literature. By weaving personal experiences with broader social commentary, Kalki creates a deeply evocative narrative that resonates with marginalized communities and allies alike. The discussion explores how Kalki uses her poetic voice to challenge societal norms, celebrate individuality, and advocate for justice while fostering a sense of empowerment and solidarity among the LGBTQ+ community. Through an intersectional lens, this paper underscores her contribution to queer literature and advocacy for transgender rights, illustrating how her work bridges the gap between art and activism, inspiring societal introspection and transformation.

Keywords: Transgender poetry, Identity, Resilience, Art and Activism, Empowerment.

Introduction

“Art has healed my wounds from the past and made me blossom into a new person”

Kalki

Kalki Subramanian is a multifaceted artist whose contributions to literature, art, and activism transcend conventional boundaries. As one of India's most prominent transgender voices, her work embodies a courageous and unapologetic spirit that challenges societal stereotypes while celebrating individuality. Her poetry transcends mere artistic expression; it becomes a manifesto of resilience, empowerment, and societal critique and also her poetry serves as both a mirror and a lamp: it reflects the lived experiences of transgender individuals and illuminates paths toward understanding and acceptance. This paper delves into three of her celebrated works—*She, Don't Tell That to Me*, *A Little Girl and Me*, and *Clap Aloud*—to examine how Kalki articulates themes of identity, resilience, and transformation. By examining these poems, the paper aims to shed light on Kalki's literary prowess and her role as a cultural icon advocating for transgender empowerment.

She: A Celebration of Identity

Kalki's *She* is a poignant poem about the essence of femininity, transcending biological constraints to embrace the fluidity of identity. The poem opens with the lines:

"Her turmeric face

Was glowing

With the crimson red kungumam"

This line encapsulates the essence of tradition and the power of symbolic imagery" transcends the literal to evoke a sense of pride, spirituality, and emotional resonance, making it a celebration of identity and cultural heritage. This poem is rich in sensory details and focuses on visual imagery. The "turmeric face" and "crimson red kungumam" create a striking image, symbolizing the woman's cultural heritage and spiritual significance. The use of red kumkum is a way for transgender women to assert their feminine identity. The "blazing sun" comparison emphasizes her radiant energy. The "rustling green saree" flowing like wings suggests freedom, movement, and a connection to nature. The image of her clapping and tapping on car windows creates a sense of dynamic energy.

The poem highlights the contrast between the woman's freedom and the confinement of the people in the cars. The use of words like "grim," "caged," and "trapped" emphasizes their emotional and psychological imprisonment. The irony lies in the fact that the woman, who is likely a beggar or a street performer, appears free and liberated, while the people in the cars, who are likely more affluent, seem trapped and unhappy. The recurring motif of rebirth in *She* resonates with the universal human experience of reinvention. Kalki's lyrical style and evocative imagery render the poem an anthem of hope for marginalized communities.

Don't Tell That to Me: Defiance Against Oppression

In *Don't Tell That to Me*, Subramanian adopts a bold and confrontational tone to address societal hypocrisy and prejudice. The poem's opening lines declare:

"I am tired of you

Telling me

Everything is perfect

Except my voice

Which could be more feminine"

The speaker feels exhausted from being told that everything about them is perfect, except for one aspect - their voice. The speaker is sensitive about their voice not being considered feminine enough, which suggests they may struggle with self-acceptance. The speaker might feel resentful towards others for focusing on this perceived flaw. The poem explores the complexities of being a transgender woman, highlighting the tension between self-identification and societal expectations. The speaker feels reduced to their gender identity, with others focusing on their appearance, voice, and personal life. The poem demands recognition of the speaker's humanity, emphasizing their shared experiences, emotions, and desires. Despite facing scrutiny and marginalization, the speaker asserts their strength and determination.

Kalki asserts her independence and refuses to be undermined by societal criticism. The poem's conversational structure underscores its accessibility, inviting readers to reflect on their biases and assumptions. The thematic core of *Don't Tell That to Me* lies in its celebration of resilience. Kalki's defiance becomes a rallying cry for individuals who refuse to be defined by the limitations imposed upon them by society.

Clap Aloud: The Sound of Solidarity

Clap Aloud is a vibrant and celebratory piece that transforms the simple act of clapping into a symbol of solidarity and affirmation. In this poem, Kalki deconstructs the stereotyping of transgenders by establishing their clapping as an act of empowerment and liberation from the misplaced and hypocritical values of society.

“Clap aloud

Thirunangai

clap aloud!

Like a crack of thunder

that shocks the world

during a great rain,

clap your hands aloud!”

The ability to have both hands free for oneself and service to humanity becomes a higher form of ethic than the selfish engagements of the workaday world. The act of clapping, thus, becomes an assertion of humanity and of the superior knowledge of identification of the self with the world. This act can be seen as a statement of defiance against a society that often marginalizes transgender individuals. It underscores the importance of self-acceptance and self-celebration in the face of adversity. It might be interpreted as a potent sign of self-acceptance and self-celebration. It emphasizes the value of resilience and self-affirmation in the face of difficulty. Through *Clap Aloud*, Kalki invites the LGBTQ+ community and their allies to partake in a collective celebration of identity and progress. The poem exemplifies how art can foster a sense of belonging and inspire action.

A Little Girl and Me: The Echo of Innocence and Understanding

The conversation in the poem between Kalki and A Little Girl unfolds naturally and touches on issues of gender and identity in a light-hearted, playful context. The child starts with a casual greeting and invitation to play, introducing a sense of innocence and normalcy. Kalki's response reflects a deep truth about her identity, revealing that she was born a boy, struggled through this experience, and then became a girl. This brings a mature and sensitive undertone to the interaction, blending the light-hearted with the serious in a way that the child, doesn't fully grasp but accepts without hesitation. Kalki's explanation of her voice and past challenges subtly introduces the concept of transgender identity. The poem delicately touches on the subject of gender transition and its associated difficulties, but without making it the focal point of the poem. A child's simple acceptance of Kalki's explanation without questioning it too deeply symbolizes innocence and the natural openness that children often have toward differences. The juxtaposition of a child's playful invitation to “play in the garden” with a heavy topic like gender transition reflects the innocence of childhood alongside the complexities of adult experiences.

Kalki's words in this poem are gentle and explanatory, yet they carry a weight of personal experience. The phrase, **“I was born a boy, suffered much, and I became a girl,”** is both matter-of-fact and profound, succinctly expressing the journey of gender transition. The simplicity of the words allows them to be easily understood by the child while also subtly acknowledging the struggle that Kalki went through. Kalki's use of language emphasizes honesty and vulnerability, making the revelation less of a shock and more of a truth shared in a tender, unhurried manner. Kalki's words convey the emotional complexities of gender identity in a digestible and relatable way. Her voice, though described as “like a boy's,” is not seen as a negative attribute; rather, it adds to the broader exploration of identity, which is marked by both struggle and eventual acceptance.

Linguistic and Stylistic Features

Kalki's poetry is characterized by its clarity and emotional depth, with her use of simple yet evocative language ensuring that her work resonates with a wide audience. Repetition, metaphor, and imagery are recurring stylistic elements that enhance the impact of her messages. By blending Indian cultural references with global themes, Kalki creates a poetic voice that is both locally rooted and globally resonant. Her linguistic style combines simplicity with profound emotional depth, ensuring her message is accessible

while retaining its poetic and activist potency. Kalki uses plain, compassionate language, which makes complex themes accessible to readers of all ages. Kalki's ability to blend serious social issues and everyday moments demonstrates a literary style that is empathetic, inclusive, and subtly powerful. The hybrid use of English alongside Indian vernacular expressions broadens the reach of her poetry, engaging diverse audiences and bridging cultural divides.

Transcendence and Transformation

Kalki's poetry reflects her journey of self-acceptance and empowerment, inspiring others to embrace their identities. Her work resonates beyond personal narratives, fostering a sense of collective identity and pride within the transgender community. Kalki demonstrates how art can transcend traditional boundaries, functioning as a medium for activism and a tool for societal transformation. While rooted in the Indian context, her themes of resilience, identity, and justice align with global movements for LGBTQ+ rights, making her poetry universally relevant. By celebrating diversity and challenging binary constructs, Kalki's work contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender fluidity and inclusivity.

Kalki critiques patriarchal constructs that marginalize not only transgender individuals but also women and other oppressed groups. Her poetry normalizes transgender experiences, paving the way for broader acceptance and representation in mainstream culture. Her celebration of transgender femininity challenges traditional notions of beauty, strength, and womanhood and her poetry serves as an educational tool, raising awareness about the challenges faced by transgender individuals and promoting empathy among readers. Her work offers a powerful counter-narrative to the often negative portrayals of transgender individuals in media, presenting them as strong, resilient, and multifaceted. By addressing societal injustices, her poetry becomes a catalyst for social and legal reforms advocating transgender rights.

Conclusion

Kalki Subramanian's poetry is a testament to the transformative power of art. Through *She, Don't Tell That to Me*, *A Little Girl*, and *Me and Clap Aloud*, she explores the complexities of identity, resilience, and societal change with unparalleled clarity and compassion. In the poetry of Kalki, we witness the powerful convergence of art and activism through visual narratives. Their work serves as a testament to the capacity of poetry to challenge societal norms, convey messages of change, and inspire collective action. In her Author's Notes to the collection, Kalki writes:

"Poetry and art give a richness to my life. They give beauty, strength, and hope. They heal. I couldn't have survived my tormenting teenage years without them."

Her work celebrates individuality, challenges societal norms, and fosters a sense of empowerment and solidarity among the LGBTQ+ community. Her work not only amplifies the voices of marginalized communities but also fosters empathy and understanding among a diverse audience. By bridging the gap between art and activism, Kalki continues to inspire a more inclusive and equitable society.

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