Rediscovering Feminine and Gender issues in the
poetry of Kamala Das

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Abstract

In the contemporary Indian literary scenario, Kamala Das occupies a prominent position as a poetess of exquisite artistry. She has attained international repute by the virtue of her bold, uninhibited articulation of gender and feminine issues with openness and frankness in voicing out her views. The concept of gender as distinct from the biological fact of sex includes a complex of sociological, cultural and psychological associations with it. Gender is the basic element of social structure, especially of a sexual division of labor that is strongly tied to gender division and male dominance. The division between male and female is socially-created, and deeply woven into our everyday life. It is not just a division, but an asymmetry, with men having more power and status. The fact of being male and female carries connotations of different power and status. Thus, gender does not have a uniform impact across situations.

Gender differences are the most ancient, most universal and powerful origins of many morally valued conceptualizations in the world around us. Gender discrimination exists in varying degrees in all the societies, whether developed or developing. She has elevated her voice against the established social order and tried to affirm her own distinct identity breaking the traditional taboos as to love and sex which is the outcome of male dominated society. She has revealed her multifaceted personality in all its power and glory with exemplary courage and conviction. She has accepted her women-hood with all its weakness and strengths and thus became a symbol of the liberated new women for her generation. She attempts to define her identity as a women and to create a space within her and around her in order to assert her legitimacy of her dreams and fantasies, and to express her hopes and frustrations. Early in life she realized that the gender differences practiced unchallenged in the traditional Indian society are responsible for many unjust customs and beliefs.

Women’s writing is the literature of silence. Its meaning lie enclosed and camouflaged. It is also the literature of silence for it seeks to express that which has been submerged and suppressed. Writing in itself, has always been an act of courage, women have often resorted to different strategies to say what they wished to say. Das had an overwhelming awareness of victim- victimizer relationship that exist between men and women as well as adverse effects of sexist culture on female psyche. The male governed society leaves
women no choices. And it was impossible for a woman to rebel against the masculine yoke, against a male’s overwhelming sense of superiority because a male, was no less than a God. She craves for a less oppressive climate for women. She was deeply distinguished with the kind of gender arrangements which treat women as a slave and thwart women’s desire to seek freedom to seek a right as an independent human being. The present paper is an attempt to explore how Kamala Das through her effective writing tried to skirt the binaries and subvert the established notions based on gender discrimination and asserted her identity through her creative writing especially poetry.

Key words: Gender discrimination, feminine issues, male dominance, identity, victim-victimizer relationship etc.

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In the contemporary Indian literary scenario, Kamala Das occupies a prominent position as a poetess of exquisite artistry. She has attained international repute by the virtue of her bold, uninhibited articulation of gender and feminine issues with openness and frankness. The concept of gender as distinct from the biological fact of sex includes a complex of sociological, cultural and psychological associations with it. Gender is the basic element of social structure, especially of a sexual division of labor that is strongly tied to gender division and male dominance. The division between male and female is socially created, and deeply woven into our everyday life. It is not just a division, but an asymmetry, with men having more power and status. The fact of being male and female carries connotations of different power and status. Thus, gender does not have a uniform impact across situations.

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“‘Gender’ is now one of the busiest, most restless terms in the English language, a word that crops up everywhere, yet whose uses seem to be forever changing, always on the move, producing new and often surprising inflections of meaning”. (Genders, Grover, David and Cora Kaplan,2000:3)

Since Simone de Beauvoir first proclaimed that “One is born not born a woman, one becomes one”, the study of gender has become one of the most significant new disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Since last couple of decades scholarly debates amongst the academia have attracted their attention. Writers have started critiquing the power relations which plays a crucial role in the patriarchal society. Gender is a cultural construct and is constantly used to negotiate age-old practices and traditions as well as
the societal frameworks that has been internalized by women themselves from generation to generation. But tensions were created by changing the sexual roles and expectations as well as expression in literary discourses.

Patriarchy, at the outset, stands for power and authority. Patria can stretch its meaning to relate to nation. Moreover, women are not only the ones to be oppressed by it: all marginalized categories, whether men or women, get caught in its web of authority. And its arms extend to almost every field- philosophy, law, governance, society itself, and more modestly the constructed family. The patriarch stands for Father Right, the right of ownership over the seed. He is not a person but an institution, a mindset, a practice, a hegemony, and thus an oppressor. Man has not only been viewed as the ‘master’ but also as the protector and the bread earner, a belief, which in large measure is a myth. He is supposed to be strong, infallible creature who has the right to authority, respect and dignity. The husband is seen to be effeminate and his wife would rather have him aggressive and demanding. As a result the males since ages take it as privilege to suppress the females. Shulamith Firestone in the work The Dialectic of Sex claimed that male domination dated to “back beyond recorded history to the animal kingdom” (Firestone, Shulamith, 1979:37)

Women across the world are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression. What binds them together is a sociological notion of “sameness” of their oppression. Women are a “powerless” group and are economically, psychologically, emotionally and sexually oppressed. Beverly Lindsay’s conclusion in the book Comparative Perspectives of Third World Women: The Impact of Race, Sex, and Class (Lindsay, Beverley,1983: 205) states that “dependency relationship, based upon race, sex, and class, are being perpetuated through social, educational, and economic institutions. These are the linkages among Third World Women. Lindsey also implies that Third World Women constitute an identifiable group purely based on the basis of shared dependencies. They were the “victims of race, sex, and class” (1983:306) When the wave of feminism emerged the educated females became conscious of their rights and started opposing the domination of males. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status.

Betty Friedan in her historic work The Feminine Mystique had attempted to demystify this false feminine mystique, which she described as “a world confined to her own body and beauty, the charming of man, the bearing of babies, and the physical care and serving of husband, children and home” in order to renew the women’s fight for equal rights. She has started a new consciousness amongst the women. (Millard, 1989:155) Like man, woman is born free but she is in chains, not always and everywhere. All women do not conform, they rebel, they reconcile, and they are both Kali and Durga, symbols of destruction as well as creation.

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itself, has always been an act of courage, women have often resorted to different strategies to say what they wished to say. Das had an overwhelming awareness of victim- victimizer relationship that exist between men and women as well as adverse effects of sexist culture on female psychology. The male governed society leaves women no choices. And it was impossible for a women to rebel against the masculine yoke, against a male’s overwhelming sense of superiority because a male was considered no less than a God. She craves for a less oppressive climate for women. She was deeply distinguished with the kind of gender arrangements which treat women as a slave and thwart women’s desire to seek freedom as an independent human being. She attempts to explore the quest for self and identity and the stark realities within and around her.

The present paper is an attempt to explore how Kamala Das elevated her voice through her effective writing tried to skirt the binaries and subvert the established notions and social order based on gender discrimination in this male dominated Indian society. She has asserted her distinct identity through her creative writing especially poetry. She has broken the traditional taboos attached to love and sex. She has struggled both for visibility and a voice and rejects the relational identity and asserts powerfully that she is not an appendage of man. A woman is not the “other”, she is not an addition to man rather an autonomous being, capable of finding her own way to salvation through trial and error. She becomes a symbol of the emancipated women, the forerunner of the emerging Indian women with liberated womanhood.

Das has published six volumes of poetry between 1965 to 1985. She has drawn upon religious and domestic imagery to explore a sense of identity. She has voiced her personal experiences including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside marriage and her life in matriarchal rural South India.

Kamala Das voiced her thoughts and emotions without any inhibition, her restlessness with the discriminatory gender roles as perpetrated by a society ruled and governed by men, trap women in wifehood and motherhood and do not permit them any freedom for self- actualization. Das had an overwhelming awareness of victim- victimizer relationship that exist between men and women as well as adverse effects of sexist culture on female psyche. The male governed society leaves women no choices. She has aptly expressed in the poem My November “the male ego forgets that/ the women wants tenderness/ soft handling of her body/ as though it were musical instrument”. She right from her childhood wished to subvert the established order which support the imbalance of power between the sexes. The male manufactured definitions of femininity nauseated her. She detested the male gaze because it situates women as an object. The power politics in sex-relationship was repulsive to her. So she wanted to escape the marriage- the bondage. She has tried to view the social set up with a women’s eye and wanted to challenge it. She felt that her refusal to assume the socially defined traditional feminine role was one way of transcending her “femininity” which is associated with passivity and inferiority. Susan Faludi in her work Blacklash (1999) remarks that “ feminism asks the world to recognize at long last that women aren’t decorative ornaments, worthy vessels, members of special interest group. They are half of the national population, just as deserving
as the other half” (S. Faludi 1999: 46) and Virginia Woolf in her essay A Room of One’s Own (1929) expressed these views with a strong female sensibility and criticism. She argues that the male-dominated ideas of the patriarchal society prevented women from realizing their creativity and potential” (Woolf, Virginia 1981:52)

Since the publication of her first collection of poetry, Summer in Calcutta (1965), Das has been hailed as an important voice of her generation, exemplified by a break from the past by writing in a distinctively Indian persona rather than adopting the techniques of the English modernists. Her provocative poems are known for their unflinchingly honest explorations of the self and female sexuality, urban life, women’s role in traditional Indian society, issues of postcolonial identity, and the political and personal struggles of marginalized women. She has delineated her feminist voice through sex-imagery. Her collection Summer in Calcutta records the poetess’s awareness about male-chauvinism. Since publication of Summer in Calcutta she has been a controversial figure known for her unusual imagery and candor. In the poems such as The Dance of Eunuchs and The Freaks, Das draws upon the exotic to discuss her sexuality and her quest for fulfillment. In the poem An Introduction Das universalizes the feelings of longing and loss as a part of collective experience of women-hood. In the collection The Descendants (1967), the poem The Maggots frames the pain of lost love and futile life.

Das condemns the gender divisions created by the male dominated society and pities a lot of women because they have been looser in the war of the sexes. The male desire to relegate women to margins suffocate her. She writes in her autobiography My Story also: “Even the air-conditioner helps, all pervasive is the male scent of your breath”. She finds it very difficult to reconcile with man-woman relationship which man is the ‘subject’, the ‘absolute’ and women is the ‘object’, the ‘other”’ Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex also writes: “The category of the other is as primordial as consciousness itself”. But she points out that when the idea of a self is constructed, the other ego “set up as a reciprocal claim”. And hence the “self” and the “other” can only be a relative concept, not the absolute one.

Das speaks of the woman’s identity in many of her poems. She openly writes of the roles the society expects of a woman. She seems to reject them and vigorously protests against the male domination, discriminating social norms which made her feel lonely and disappointed. She boldly breaks out of the set mould of society. As a creative writer, she sometimes feels the inadequacy of language to express all her experiences and feelings. She expressed to Iqbal Kaur in an interview as: “yes I feel that inadequacy every day, every moment, when I feel I should express myself freely. (Kaur, 1992: 05) She writes of the restrictions the family and the society imposes on the female. The code of conduct she is supposed to follow is expressed in the poem An Introduction:

Dress in a saree, be girl,
Be wife they said, be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in, oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don’t sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.
Be any, or be Kamala. Or better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to choose a name, a role. Don’t play pretending games.

Her relationship is based on resentment, disappointment and frustration as much as love. Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre* writes: “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you” She is certainly dissatisfied with marital relation and breaks the suffocating bond fiercely.

She has presented Indian English poetry a new discourse from the point of view of women. To communicate the vision of truth the kind of language she has used was never used before. The women writers have also struggled to handle language which has developed through masculine constructs. “Language is instrumental in maintaining an awareness of mutual interdependence of self and the world. Words can free an individual from the tyranny of self as ego (Gibson, 1973:21). She was well aware of the power of language in assertion of her identity. Though words are “liquid and effortless” but Kamala Das in her poem *Words* writes:

All around me are words, and words and words,
They grow on me like leaves, they never
Seem to stop their slow growing
From within… but I tell myself, words
Are a nuisance, beware of them…they
can be so many things… a sea with
paralyzing waves, a knife willing to cut your throat

The crux of Kamala Das’s poetry is a search for a distinct identity. In this process of self-search she oscillates between her nostalgic past and nightmarish present. Past for her is a symbol of security, love and freedom and present stands for insecurity, pretensions and bondage of society. She longs to recover a lost childhood innocence symbolized by life with her grandmother in their ancestral home. She got nostalgic about her childhood and her grandmother’s house. She recollects the days when love was poured on her when she was young. Her past becomes a source of solace to her. Her grandmother’s death created an incurable wound in her. In the poem *My Grandmother’s House* she writes: “There was a house now far away
where once I received love…I lived in such a house and was proud, and loved…I who have lost my way and beg now at strangers door’s to receive love, at least in small change” (My Grandmother’s House)

But later when she got married and had no occasion to affirm her identity. She was married at the age of fifteen to a bank official; who was insensitive to a young girl’s longings. She was bound to perform domestic duties in the family against her tender feelings and yearnings for emotional involvement. The male domination on feminine psyche proved to be very disturbing to her. She writes in the poem Composition “I have lost my best friend/ to a middle aged queer”. The sacrifices and silences which marriage demands require almost a superhuman ability to ignore the self. Das has written a lot of poems yearning for love and support. She asserts in the poem The Old Playhouse:

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her

In the long summer of your love so that she would forget

Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but

Also her nature, the urge to fly,

And the endless pathways of the sky

She highlights the disastrous consequences of male domination and voiced her frustration in her marital and extra-marital relationships. She loved her husband fondly but her love was not reciprocated. The collection The Old Playhouse portrays how her fostered dreams and destinations have been suppressed in the company of a spider like husband. She expressed “He no longer calls for me, he no longer comes to me, or stands at the open window to smile at me”. This theme finds repeated expression in the poem The Congluration, she asks herself sarcastically: “women, is the happiness, this lying buried beneath a man?” In the poem The Sunshine Cat she writes “It is my nature to love, but I cannot be kind to you” and in the same poem she also draws attention towards the pitiful condition of women and futility of loveless relations. She writes in the poem Old Play House:

He did not beat me

But my sad woman- body felt so beated

The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me

I shrank pitifully

She tries to find comfort and solace in loving him but finds him ugly and lustful and suffers mentally and physically. In another poem titled Suicide she writes: “But I must pose, I must pretend, I must act the role of a happy women, happy wife”. She was expected to project herself to be happy always even the time she was deeply saddened. It was impossible for a women to rebel against the masculine yoke, male’s overwhelming
sense of superiority because a male, was no less than a God. She craves for a less oppressive climate for women. She was deeply anguished with the kind of gender arrangements which treat women as a slave and thwart women’s desire to seek freedom to seek a right as an independent human being.

She beautifully dramatizes the pangs of sorrows of a woman involved in lifeless and loveless relationship. She is disgusted with non-stop sexual demands which she calls “skin lazy hunger” (*The Freaks*) The word *Freak* is used as a metaphor for abnormal behavior of the male and female who are bound in a lifeless relationship. She says that “our hearts are like dry cisterns” devoid of love. Further she writes:

I am a freak, it’s only
To save my face, I flaunt, at
Times, a grand, flamboyant lust

The central argument of Kamala Das’s poetry is the search for an ideal sexual union in which the distinction between male and female ceases to control. There is a passionate desire for unquestioning love but she fails to get such love. Her failure to get true love turns into a death wish. She writes in the poem *Composition*:

Fall in with an unsuitable person
Fling yourself on him
Like a moth on a flame
Let there be despair in every move.
Excavate deep, deep pain

She wanted to alter her sad situation by projecting herself like a boy. Deep within her she had a secret desire to be a male, who had freedom to think, wear and be strong to discard the societal impositions. She intentionally decided to wear her “Brother’s shirt and trousers” and “cut my hair short and ignored my womanliness”. She wanted to get rid of her feminine image which harmed her and made her suffer. She also questions that why should she have a name given by someone else? In Indian traditional society the surname of the girls changes according to the partner’s surname. At some places girls have to give up their names too. She writes:

I have a name, had it for thirty years,
chosen by someone else for convenience…
Why? Why should I remember or bear
that sweet- sounding name (*Spoiling the name*).

At one point of time she asks the man “Who is he?” and he replies “It is I” The “I” represents the power he carries in the relationship and the world around. He is the decision making authority so he is in a position to use the pronoun “I” but she being a submissive, week and docile being can’t use the pronoun “I”
for herself. She tries to come to terms with her own identity both as a “saint” and a “sinner”. She is caught between the binaries of her own thoughts and the world which tries to contain her in the set norms and parameters. Emily Dickinson also expressed the same notion in her poetry “I cannot live with you” she writes:

I cannot live with you
It would be life-
And life is over there-

Behind the shelf she craves for freedom but the sexual freedom never gives her the desired satisfaction. She is denied the sustaining comforts and friendship, her search which began on an optimistic note is hopelessly defeated. She expresses “not because of morality/but because/I do not feel the need”. Ironically her situation becomes worsened and it poses more questions and doubts. She writes in the poem Composition as:

Freedom became my dancing shoes
How well I danced,
And danced without rest,
Until the shoes turned grimy on my feet
And I began to have doubts

She also raises the significant question of male snare to confine woman to fulfill his male ego. Sexual control of women is a universal phenomenon. She desires to fly like a bird from these bindings and impositions, “like a bird I migrated to warmer climes”. Bird imagery is favorite with Kamala Das, she gets a feel of freedom. She writes:

… I shall someday take
Wings fly around, as often petals
Do when free in air…

She is caught in the cocoon of social identity and hits back at the traditional role of wife. She laments over her loss of identity. She felt like a “prisoner” and “fragile glass” and hurt in the bargain. She lodges a complaint to her husband and to her own self. She writes in The Stone Age:
Be kind, you turn me into a bird of stone, a granite dove
You build round me a shabby drawing room
And stroke me pitted face absent-mind
You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning sleep
You stick a finger into my dreaming eye

Though Kamala Das questions the traditional role of women as a wife, mother and householder, but after all questioning and probing, she realizes that man’s love is the last resort even though it may be crushing her own being and personality. Julliete Minces cites that patriarchal family as the basis for “an almost identical vision of women”. It seems that after all the freedom and wandering, a woman has to come back to man’s love and even his scorn. In the poem *Morning at the Apollo Pier* she writes:

...your love is
A morass where I must sink, if not today,
Tomorrow...
Your flawed beauty is my only refuge,
O love me, love me, love me, till I die

She longs for a utopian state of affairs in which the unequal boundaries of gender do not exist. She presents the picture of such a state of affairs when she writes: “When he / and I were one, we were neither/ Male or female”.

No wonder, it is almost impossible to concretize this vision. So this desire for a feminist utopia entered into a conflict with the traditional image of femininity – a conflict which drove her almost to madness. She felt that she was a “misfit everywhere”. She says “I brooded long stifling my sobs”. Kamala Das longs for the “idealized phallus” manifested in the personality of lord Krishna. She glorifies Radha’s eternal waiting for lord Krishna and assumes a Radha like personality and feels and expressed in the poem *The Descendants*

Everything in me
Is melting even the hardness of the core
O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting,
Nothing remains but you…

We encounter all together a different self of Kamala Das. She is not egoistic, radical feminist, man-hater but a worshiper and devotee of the idealized phallus. She is no longer interested in body, in the “Skin-
communicated thing” in the joy physical union. Finally, a transformation takes place in her attitude to life, love and in her vision. In Krishna she celebrates spiritual love.

Your body is my prison, Krishna

I cannot see beyond it

Your darkness blinds me

Das is conscious of her limitations of her mortality. She transcends the physical self. Her concern no longer remain the contours of ‘self. Emotions rather than ideas dominate Kamala Das’s poetry and recall, recovery and rediscovery are her means of recording the past. Through this confessional psychological journey she comes to terms with her own self.

R. Parthasarthy says: “Kamala Das impresses by being very much herself in her poems. The tone is distinctly feminine.”(1989:29) Das is sincere, honest and truthful to certain values that reach beyond the individual into the human situation at large. On reading the poems in her collection *The Descendants*, what is found missing is conscious deliberation on childhood experiences and memories, her adolescent love and the attendant joy, sorrow and guilt. Das consciously and painstakingly transports the readers to the drama of her adult life and denies her readers the much awaited participation in the pleasures and pain that is natural accompaniment of growing up.

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Literary creativity came to her rescue and helped her return her sanity. It enabled her give out an outlet to her unfilled desires and provided her opportunities to establish her identity. Thus, there was no possibility of going beyond her situation, she could still do so by creative writing. The sense of selfhood which was so strong to be annihilated got sublimated through her creative writing. She writes “mind that sees and hears and is aware” (Introduction). Her writing served as a therapy and helped her confront and transcend the overwhelming realities of life. It helped her “cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff/ which weighs upon the heart”.

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