

QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN THE WORK OF KAMLA DAS AND ANITA DESAI

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Abstract

Time has changed and so has the status of women in society. This is also reflected by the contribution of women in literature. Twenty first century women write to participate in enduring debates like never before. They have evolved from the past and are speculating the future. They write to raise their voice by challenging questions and proposing answers. They write not only to explore the world and its issues but also to understand themselves. On one hand, they address the question of sexuality, relationship, love, private or secret experience and on the other hand they discuss politics, disparities and economic realities. In a world dominated by men, Often Literature is represented by male point of view. Yet, female writers have continued to contribute in Literature. Men have used language as a tool to exercise their power over women. The goal of feminist literature is to establish what kind of voice women have in this male dominated world. Feminist Literature may be a fiction or nonfiction but it emphasizes on equal civil, economic, political and social rights of women. It often identifies the inequality in the role of men and women particularly as regards status, privilege and power and generally concludes by portraying the consequences to communities and societies as undesirable. As we can see in the poetry of Kamla Das who has emerged as one of the most significant writers in Indo-Anglican literature in the post independent India. Kamala Das epitomizes the most significant stage of development of Indian Feminine poetic sensibility. Her poetic sensibility can be seen in her all types of poems, which include positive or negative poems and personal poems. Also, the work of Anita Desai reflects the emerging women's search for fulfillment, their feelings, quests for identity, aspirations and agonies. Her work challenges the basic tenets of culture and tradition of her time.

In this Maculine Universe, a woman recognizes herself unassertive and repressed. Since long she always poses a question to herself as to when she would be an autonomous and self-sufficient woman. Whether, any time in future, she would be eligible to constitute an independent society, as a subjective being, she would forbid her docility! Simon De Beauior comments: “This has always been a man’s world;.....History has shown as that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchate they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the other.(1)

Can there be any way for woman to come out of this miserable condition? This is the most striking question on which numerous novelists have raised direct and indirect voices. They recent the problems inequality or discrimination in this patriarchal society of her father who decides next man to control her under his supervision. Thereafter, this next man who is known as her husband, gives her more duties to obey silently. For woman, the recognition comes only when she is unified with man. “To pose woman is to pose the absolute other, without reciprocity, denying against all experience that she is a subject, a fellow human being.”(2)

Twenty first century women write to participate in enduring debates like never before. They write to raise their voice by challenging questions and proposing answers. They write not only to explore the world and its issues but also to understand themselves. On one hand, they address the question of sexuality, relationship, love, private or secret experience and on the other hand they discuss politics, disparities and economic realities. In a world dominated by men, Often Literature is represented by male point of view. Yet, female writers have continued to contribute in Literature. The goal of feminist literature is to establish what kind of voice women have in this male dominated world. Feminist Literature may be a fiction or nonfiction but it emphasizes on equal civil, economic, political and social rights of women. It often identifies the inequality in the role of men and women particularly as regards status, privilege and power and generally concludes by portraying the consequences to communities and societies as undesirable. Feminine anger expresses the resentment of the conscious world in the form of literature at the unfair behaviour towards women. Its true that writers write their own experience of life in their works and women writers write what they have felt in life.

Women writers have a humanizing and cathartic effect on the readers. We can find resilient accounts of feminine anger, struggle and self assertion to retrieve the female identity. As we can see in the poetry of Kamla Das who has emerged as one of the most significant writers in Indo-Anglican literature in the post independent India. Kamala Das epitomizes the most significant stage of development of Indian Feminine poetic sensibility. Her poetic sensibility can be seen in her all types of poems, which include positive or negative poems and personal poems. Also, the work of Anita Desai reflects the emerging women’s search for fulfillment, their feelings, quests for identity, aspirations and agonies. Her work challenges the basic tenets of culture and tradition of her time.

Kamala Das says: “I Myself had no control over my writing which emerged like a rash of prickly heat in certain season.” as a confessional poetess.

Kamala Das is known as the poetess of love. Love is the core of her poetry. She herself admits “obscurity: of literature”. Love is beautiful whatever four lettered name the puritan calls

it by. It is the foretaste of paradise. It is the only pastime that involves soul. Search for love is principal pre-occupation of Kamala Das's poetry.

Love is means to discover oneself. She writes about love from the woman's point of view. To Kamala Das the centre is not the blind worship of the husband but the consummation of love. The spirit is the same bold, thrift and often painfully honest. A striking individuality sets her poetic output apart from other poets.

Dwivedi writes: "She is essentially a poet of love and tenderness. She is aware of the world around her and gives a living expression to modern Indian women's thoughts and feelings."

Dr. Murli Manohar likes this Indian poetess because of her individuality and independence. She is candid and honest in her self-exploring. Her poetry shown a landmark in her female journey from "victimization to consciousness." Writing about the essence of Kamala Das Poetry, Nambiar writes, "She becomes a feminist writer by making her women conscious and providing them wings to rise and flutter and hence constructing a collective identity. The essence of her poems is struggle about her own self. As the self, female self, in her takes different roles, the ultimate self in her cries out honestly which, in fact turns out to be a collective cry. It is a cry for freedom".(3)

We take some of her representative poems that are charged with her spirit of revelry and reveal her venture into areas unclaimed by society. 'The Freaks', a forthright statement of feminine sensibility, depicts emotional barrenness and the loneliness that the female persona feels while engaging in sex act. The female persona enters the sex cosmos to realize her Self and to be united with the male in order to have a place in his heart but on the contrary; her ambivalence comes to the front. She wishes to have a feeling of oneness with her male lover (husband) as her body is in sexual act while her whole being remain aloof in absence of the nourishment of her feeling and emotion. Disillusionment and cynicism are the offshoots of the sex act that makes her freaks.

"He talks, turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam"

'My Grandmother's House' with its nostalgic aroma is an endeavour of kamala Das to peep into the secure and safe days of the past that she passed with her grandmother when she was a child. Her heart is choked with intensity of emotion when she recalls her grandmother and the day she died. Even the house "withdrew int silence". This house used to be the protective cover, which she misses at her husband's house. Kamala das searches for her Self in the floodlight of her husband's house but the light blinds her and does not afford any sense of security. Hence, she wishes to shift the darkness of her grandmother's house to her husband's house where the darkness will safeguard and protect her from the strangers and the enemies.

" how often I think of going
There, to peer through blind eyes of windows or
Just listen to the frozen air,
Or in wild despair, pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it her to lie
Behind my bedroom door like a brooding

Dog.....”

Z.F. Molvi writes “in the poetry of Kamala Das, the world of harmony and love is symbolized by her grandmother. With her grandmother’s death she woke up to the brutal facts of life”. (4)

‘A hot Noon in Malabar’ reminds us of words worth’s intimation where the poet in his mature years misses the celestial light as he used to see in his childhood. The celestial pleasure is missed by Das in her husband’s house that become a torture. In exploring the self, she feels worn out and lonesome. It seems that the Malabar House with her grandmother becomes the supreme Self for which the Self of the poet is Yearning but the way that goes there is afar and she cannot think of it without breaking the fetters and chains that do not allow her to move. The way for her is to parade from memory to desire without reaching the goal. Her exploration of the Self remains unexplored. The more she explores the Self, the more she finds herself between nostalgia and estrangement. She cries in despair:

“To be here, far away, is torture wild feet
Stirring up the dust, this hot noon, at my
Home in Malabar, and I so far away....”

‘The Invitation’, is a confessional poem that reveals the poet’s sexual act with a certain lover and her intention to commit suicide because of the lover’s deserting her. While standing on the seashore, the female persona realizes that the sea is inviting her to make an end of her life by drowning. The sea asks her that she will lose nothing by drowning but it will gain something by swallowing her body. She recalls the man whom she loved to reject the invitation of the sea. The lover used to come to her arms like a fish that comes up for air. But she dismisses the memory, as she knows the lover will not come to entertain any help. But again she recalls that she felt paradise on the bed of six by two. Then the sea asks her to have a cool bath and pillow her head on anemones otherwise she will end her life “Iying on a funeral pyre/with a burning head” but she is so obsessed with love that she needs the same lover to construct and destruct it. She wishes to be lost for love:

“ no, I am still young
And I need that man for construction and
Destruction. Leave me.....”

If the poem is minutely examined, it seems to be Das’s exploration of the Self. Indian critics have found in her poems the voice of new liberated women without realizing that she ever speaks on behalf of anybody but herself, let alone any class and section of Indian society. Kamala Das writes with a frankness and openness unusual in the Indian context. She exploits the confessional mode in order to discover the images that evoke the joy and frustration of achieved womanhood.

Among the post- independence Indo-English writers Anita Desai holds a prominent place not because of any inventions in style or technique or treatment of startling new themes that she can lay claim to, but because of the immense popularity she commands as a novelist of human predicament of anxiety, frustration and loneliness in the insensitive and inconsiderate contemporary world, and because she has given new dimension to the indo-English novel by turning from outer to inner reality and by carrying floe of the mental experience of its characters. Anita Desai is a remarkable woman novelist. She began her literary career quite early at the age of 26 and wrote many novels even amidst her house-wifely. Some of Desai’s novels are Cry, The

Peacock (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye, Blackbird* (1971), *Where shall We go this Summer?*, (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) and *Clear light of Day* (1980). In all her major novels, Anita Desai has dealt with the feminine sensibility more emphatically than the description of the man and his exploit. All major novels are replete with a powerful description of feminine sensibility. Not only this, even in her short stories, the central theme is certainly the theme of feminine sensibility.

'Cry, The Peacock' is a tale of Maya's love for Gautam, her husband. Deeply devoted and affectionate in nature, over sensitive in mental proclivities, Maya requires a love partner who can sympathize commensurably with her sensibilities. But the tragedy begins in her life because her husband Gautam does not possess those wide ranging sympathies. In sum, *Cry, the Peacock* is a pioneering effort towards exposing the psychological problems of an alienated woman. As Meena Beliappa remarks: "The ardent introspection of Maya marks a valuable introversion in Indian Fiction. It points to a line of significant development-exploration, not of the 'social' man, but 'the lone individual,'" (5) the novel is a powerful study of the experience of a disturbed and alienated mind. Ann Foreman considers women's alienation profoundly disturbing because women experience themselves as fulfillment of other people's needs:

"Man exists in social world.....For the woman, however, her place is within the home.....Men seek relief from their alienation through their relations with women; for women there is no relief.(1977: 101-102)

In '*Voices in the City*', Monisha is endowed with higher sensibilities which is self evident when she is attuned to music in the conference hall. "I wander in this labyrinth at will and blessedly we never touch, merely remain in mystic communion with each other. I am willing to follow till I die".

In '*Bye-Bye Blackbird*' there is a powerful encounter of the east and the west. Whereas fascination for England has been presented through Adit and Dev, that for India through Sarah, Emma Moffit and Christine Langford. Disenchantment with England is particularly epitomized through Adit and Dev. However, throughout the novel, it is the feminine sensibility that dominates more than the other thematic strains.

'Where shall we go this Summer?' Is again a powerful novel delineating feminine sensibility. Despite the fact that this delineation is chiefly expressed through the projection of one single theme, the crisis of conscience and values, Sita, the female protagonist in the novel, dominates the entire theme of the novel.

Anita's '*Fire on the Mountain*' symbolizes feminine sensibility in a heightened way. Nanda Kaul, the protagonist in the novel, symbolizes the heightened feminine sensibility. This novel presents a study of trauma of a housewife, the trauma that takes refuge in seclusion. The life-long faithlessness of Mr. kaul to Nanda Kaul and the hypocritical situation force her to avow this severance. Nanda kaul has conceded this after passing through psychic suffering and bitter experiences of a marital life. This wedding is veritably based on physical lust and circumstantial convenience for Mr. kaul . Mr. Kaul does not love her as a wife. She plays the gracious hostess all the time and enjoys the comforts and social status of the wife of a dignified person. Nanda Kaul becomes a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother of many unwanted and unloved children. Her life as the Vice-chancellor's wife though crowded and full of social activity, was truly purposeless and in satiating. There have been too many guests coming and going all the time, leaving little privacy for her. She ever passes her life to arrange the dinner table as a hard

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

working hostess. The novelist presents the trauma of a housewife through the following passages:

“The old house, the full house, of that period of her life when she was the vice-chancellor’s wife and at the hub of a small but intense busy world,.....
.....then there had been their friends, all of different ages and sizes and families.(F.O.M., 29-30)

The fire on the Mountain becomes the emblem of destruction and purgation, the destruction of an unkind world of many Nanda kauls and Ila Dases, of an unequal situation in which women suffer from the slings of misfortune, social inequities and injustices committed on them by a savage society of men. The title of the novel is emblematic of the revolt of the new generation of women against the male chauvinistic society. That is why Anita Desai, commenting upon the importance of such feelings, remarks in an interview: “But I’m quite sure that even life contains many traumatic experiences”.(6)

A study of the fiction of Anita Desai reveals the creative potentialities of a human being who is cramped in by her associations with social mores and conventions which reflect her connections with the objective world.

References

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