

Woman as Doubly Colonized: A View of Kamala Das's Poetry

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 19 June 2018

Keywords

Marginalization, patriarchy, unrequited love, suffering

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Das is regarded as one of the most distinctive Indian poets and a staunch feminist. She is known as a spokesperson of women's sufferings and despair. In her poetry she unveiled many issues of women which were otherwise suppressed under the societal pressure. The thematic concern of her poetry is subjugation of women, unrequited love and the disintegrating marital life. The craving of true love by woman becomes a focal point of her poetry. Post-colonial feminist theorists gave a new direction to feminism and debated about the plight of women in a male dominated society. They viewed women's struggle as a tough battle for their existence. Kamala Das has raised her voice against the colonization of women by their male counterparts. This paper is an attempt to study the selected poems of Kamala Das from post-colonial feminist perspective.

The Post-colonial feminist theorists gave a new acreage to feminism by talking about the plight of women in a patriarchal world. The woman is doubly colonized – by her husband and then by the society. Women have to fight hard for their existence in this society. The plight of Indian woman is different from her European counterparts and the ideas of these post-colonial feminists were Eurocentric. They realized that the problems of women differ in every society due to religious, cultural and socio-economic differences and every woman has to fight her own battle in her distinctive way. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak made her appearance with her peculiar term 'subaltern' towards the theory of post-colonialism.

In her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Gayatri Spivak divulges on the existence of Subaltern woman through the ideological discourse. A woman either remains absent or silent, she is not being heard when she tries to speak. Spivak argues that a woman is being sandwiched between the ideological conflicts of patriarchy and imperialism pushing her to the marginality. According to her, subaltern encompasses all the subjugated sections of society. She writes: "As objects of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow."(23)

In the Indian society women are being worshipped as goddesses but the same society imposes its rules on her. The different roles are assigned to her after her birth and she is expected to perform her roles meticulously. She experiences subjugation at her paternal home and after marriage she has to submit herself to her husband and obey him like a slave. She loses her identity and acquires new identity as a daughter, sister, wife, and mother and to fit in the frame of these roles she extinguishes her original self.

Her plight doesn't end here, she can't raise her voice against the societal norms and as long as she satisfies her husband she is accepted but when her body starts declining she is ignored by her husband. For men, woman is a mere

commodity and she is being objectified sexually. She finds herself in chains of slavery and cannot break these shackles to free her from colonial subjugation of men and the patriarchal society.

Kamala Das is perhaps the first woman poet who could not resist this silence of woman and gave voice to the suppressed women in her bold writings. She could not reconcile with the idea of gender roles imposed upon women by the society at all ages and resented it from a very young age. As she stepped into her teen age, people started dictating her and she started crushing under the cultural burden of male dominated society. In her poem 'An Introduction' she presents the sensibility of Indian society where an adolescent girl is dictated to adhere to the societal norms.

Dress in sarees, 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.
(Kamala Das: Selected Poems 6)

She often felt that men cannot understand the feelings of women. Getting married at an early age of fifteen she always yearned for the true love in her marital life, but found disillusionment and frustration. This bitter experience of her hollow relationship colored all her poetry. As a Hindu wife, she was merely a servant to her husband who was expected to look after the comforts of her husband, to cater to all his needs, in short she was doubly colonized and had to obey the dictates of her husband. Her intellect started diminishing and she found her intellectual stature reduced to a dwarf. She writes in 'The Old Play house'

You called me wife, I was taught to break saccharine into
your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your

Questions I mumbled incoherent replies. (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems 69*)

Kamala Das's feminine sensibility articulated the pain that male dominated world inflicted on her. Her relationship with her husband was devoid of emotions and she was a mere tool to gratify his sexual desires. Her could not understand her feelings and she longed to get that love from other men but they too used her to gratify their desires. As a colonizer plunders the wealth of mother colony and robs her of its natural resources, in the same way male colonizes woman's body and destroys her feminine chastity. In 'The Sunshine Cat' she writes:

They did this to her, the men who knew her, the man
She loved, who loved her not enough, being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved her
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher, the band
Of cynics she turned to, clinging to their chests where
New hair sprouted like great-winged moths, burrowing her
Face into their smells and their young lusts to forget,
To forget, oh to forget. . (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems 23*)

Kamala Das displayed immense courage to revolt against sexual colonization of men and tried to draw attention of the readers towards suffering and humiliation which women are made to experience. Recalling her childhood experiences in her poem 'Nani' she shows the plight of a pregnant house maid who faces social ostracism and ends her life by hanging herself. Nani had to end her life to escape from the shame and moral austerity but the man responsible for making her pregnant was

let go scot free by the society. Kamala Das has raised many unanswerable questions in her poem 'Nani':

Nani, she asked who is she?
With that question ended Nani. Each truth
Ends with a query. It is this designed
Deafness that turns morality into
Immorality, the definite into
The soft indefinite. (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems 74*)

The society doesn't seem to provide answer to such questions nor does it seem to salvage women of her sufferings. The poor maid was hanging for three hours until the police came and she became a puppet in the hands of a male and the society further subjected her to humiliation and pain.

A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew
Turning her gently on the rope, it seemed
To us who were children then, that Nani
Was doing, to delight us a comic Dance. (*Kamala Das: Selected Poems 74*)

To conclude we can say that suffering of women in the patriarchal society has been a dominating theme in the poetry of Kamala Das and she believes that a woman cannot attain freedom from the domineering male society and as Spivak ends her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' on a strong note that a "subaltern cannot speak" similarly Kamala Das opines that a woman has to win war against double colonial subjugation to which she is being subjected to in this post-colonial society.

References

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