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Introducing “An Introduction”:  
Kamala Das the poet of the female ‘Other’

Abstract: Kamala Das, labeled as “the Mother of Modern Indian English Poetry”, was of the view that marriage for women in any third world country leads to sufferings on account of their gendered experiences. They live a status of ‘other’ not only in the macro world but also in the micro world. The dialectic of man-woman relationship is poetically presented by her in the semblance of master-slave one in the postcolonial scenario. It is “an introduction” into their own desired land comprising of love and peace; “slamming the door” on the institution called marriage. The ‘subaltern’ thus traces a place of their own to re-generate themselves into an emancipated woman. Das is vividly recording the marital journey of each woman of a third world country through the confessional poem “An Introduction.” As a consequence the poem reaches its universality through contemporaneity.

Keywords: alienation, male fantasy, margin, master-slave conflict, patriarchy, sexual politics, subaltern.

In the task of considering Indian English poetry under the lens of femininity or gender–relationship, a sensitive reader might look for one who has the courage or power to articulate those issues in a challenging and rebellious manner. Kamala Das is undoubtedly that name. She is a genuine artist who can articulate her pent up feelings in a sincere but formidable manner – formidable to those who try their best to suppress the fire of anger and protest of the women for so long a time – time from the Vedic Ages up to the post-modern one. A close scrutiny of Das’s poems might reveal that they are her true autobiographies and hence they can be labelled, slightly amending her published autobiography, *My Story*, as ‘her story.’

Among the women poets in the realm of Indian English poetry, Kamala Das has the courage and determination to present the men–women relationship in a new light of love and

sexuality, something which can also be found in Sujata Bhatt and Taslima Nasreen. Branded as a 'confessional poet,' Kamala Das opens up new avenues for the readers to look forward to human relationship with a new perspective, something rarely attempted by any woman poet. She mainly deals with the role of woman in man's life. Relying on her own life as the main supply house of materials, she has proved that man is incompetent as to live a superior life of his own. It is the woman who gives her all to a man to transform him into Man. She takes the initiative to complete the circle of a perfect relationship, though she remains outside the periphery of the main area. Her place is reserved in the margin, only to suffer as a marginalized entity. This man-woman relationship may be viewed as akin to the postcolonial master-slave conflict. The torturous psyche of this rebellious poet is in search of love and justification of the meaning of marriage, with a capacity to universalize her feelings of protest and anger in such a way as to give the feminist critical mode a new "introduction."

She reveals, rather ironically, that one of the basic foundations of the man-woman relationship is the elemental fire of sexuality. This line of thinking is certainly a great blow to the traditionally accepted notion of marriage as a sanctified social institution. But to Das marriage means a process in which the emotions and feelings of the women are crushed down. It is no fulfillment of their prospects. She has advanced her views by saying that it is the woman who shapes the psychic corridor and the sensory experiences of a man. Women are essential to complete the circle of love as postulated in the famous compass image of Donne so early in his poem "A Valediction: forbidding mourning." But the irony is that in the world of 'love' it is man's stronger hand that indirectly delineates the position or space of the female. So the women in the Third-world territory have their space as granted by the phallic world. Kamala Das takes up her pen against this traditionally accepted notion and tries to actuate the concept of womanhood. She speaks for the emancipation of the 'other sex' by articulating the pangs and sufferings of the tortured ones. The Post-colonial tension between the ruler and the ruled may also be located in man-woman relationship as enunciated by Kamala Das. Women in her poetry are the object of male fantasy and desire. This may be called a recurrent motif force in her entire poetic canon. Her poetry is categorically gendered. The role of sexuality has been advanced in a much rebellious way as to show that it is basically an androgynous 'business.' Women are essentially the 'Second Sex' in her poetic corpus. They seek for love and certitude but are hauntingly deprived. They tend to be the seekers of 'love' outside marriage. Das has shown the hollowness of 'marriage' as an institutional business. It is the monopoly of patriarchy.

Kamala Das deals with all sorts of divergent facets of love. While depicting love outside marriage, she is not propagating adultery or infidelity, but merely searching for a relationship which gives both love and security. Search for love and security is typical of a woman in Indian context. But this search gets frustrated as only lust overpowers love and contaminates emotional relationship. Das shows that marriage is a 'passport' for a man to enter the world of sexuality. She has tried to dramatize the different aspects of marriage which culminate into no prospects for women. So, her women have to get emancipation from the 'anxiety of influence' that marriage, which gives vent to the antagonistic patriarchy, has cast upon them. This is no doubt a great 'advancement of learning' for the women in general. So all her emotional marriages are reduced to antagonism. She encounters the male world on her own terms and ironically enough presents a critique of heterosexual power and hypocrisy. Anger and protest are embedded in woman's sexuality which is what Sartre called a "hostile eroticism," delighted to turn upside down the very myth of virility it pretends to serve.

Kamala Das, adopting a 'deliberate disguise' as Madhavikutty, voices forth the wretched condition of indigenous women, choosing English, as her mode of expression, felicitating a sort of universality in her approach to all. The 'exile' condition of women, the alienation of the mind from their body is very subtly depicted in her poems.

She tries to de-construct the construct of patriarchy by means of the sheer force and vitality of her poetic articulations. Her poems may not have that sort of aesthetic appeal which would make them universal 'art' product, but they have a genuineness of purpose, beliefs and feelings. She says what she "feels," not what she "ought to say." In that sense she may be labeled as a propagandist, but she is such one for a purpose which she earnestly believes. Das projects the entire weaker sex as the subalterns, threatened by the patriarchal world. This Patriarchal world can be named as the Western nation and their counter-parts as the ethnic minority who are a new kind of colonized group in the eyes of Das. She wants to show that the third world women are gradually converting themselves to be immigrants on accounts of their gendered experience. They are immigrants in the sense that they are trying to break the marital bonds, for marriage has given them nothing except pangs of suffering by "freak" husbands. In that sense she is the propagator of the theoretical proposition of Spivak that the three formidable markers – poor, dark and woman – are the very cause of the subordination of women.

The 'lovers' of Kamala Das, posed as a minor class, act as an agent of solace and retreat for the colonized, marginal and de-centered women who face constantly the burden of solitude, pangs of sequestration and also existential angst. So the third world women can be

projected as the Orient (“other-ed”) in their own country which is itself an Oriental one. Since the West, here represented by the phallic world, could not ontologically obliterate the Orient, the castrated class, so the former captured, tortured and then radically altered its human details into trans-human arguments. Thus the Orientals (the fairer sex) are turned into an ‘object’ of study, stamped with an otherness, making it non-active, non-autonomous and non-participating commodities of desire. So when these castrated ones overcome the sufferings of ‘lack,’ and come out from all social bindings, they search for love outside marriage which is not a case of adultery, according to Das. Instead, these minor classes can be said to be born as cultural hybrids that emerge in moments of historical transformation - a transformation from rejecting the world of husbands to have “an introduction” into the peaceful world of love.

Kamala Das is never a ‘sexual politician’ in her approach to the sensations and feelings of female body. She writes with her body. Millet’s theoretical speculations regarding sexual politics find enough justification in Kamala Das’s poetic application. In fact, it may not be an exaggeration to label her poetry as showing male ‘sexual politics’ she has prided for being possessed a beautiful body. She has used ‘body’ as a trope, a means of fantasy to destroy male desire.

Gender, sexuality and class are collateral issues in post-colonial discourse. Unfortunately enough, these three terms have been mercilessly applied to categorize ‘the second sex.’ Kamala Das’s poetic movement and psychic revelation can be found as posing a great challenge against this three-tier evil. And her task is more difficult because she is a poet and a woman. Anger, despair and protest - these are the cardinal matters in Das’s poetic corpus that found a profound revelation in the socio-psychic territory. In fact, life and art, for her, are analogous as it was for Shaw. As a ‘revolutionary’ poetic artist Kamala Das so effortlessly continues the notions of such feminist theoreticians as Kate Millet and Simone de Beauvoir that the ‘politics’ of the male-world imposed upon the female psyche is related to the power-structure relationship and arrangements by which one group of the society controls and dominates the other. Simone de Beauvoir considers that humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. She also propagates that man can think of himself without woman, but she cannot think of herself without man. This idea has been expressed in the poem. And, moreover, it shows affinity with de Beauvoir’s view when this feminist critic boldly affirms:

And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex,’ by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex – absolute sex, no less (16).

The passionate and instinctive desire of a woman, essentially needed for her growth and upliftment – both emotional and social – are mercilessly cut short by the cruel advocacy of the male world.

“An Introduction,” one of the significant poems in *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (2004), is a profound documentation of Kamala Das’s exploitation of the unhealthy relationship of a woman, newly married, and her husband which verges on the level of post-coloniality. In the entire schematization of the poem, the absentee husband is the metaphorical representation of the ruling class. Although he is not vehemently presented as in “The Freaks”, he is no less an oppressor in the marital relationship. He wants every sort of marital fidelity and integrity on her part, though he does nothing in this respect. The master-slave relationship, a very patent and potent one in post-colonial worldview, is finely dramatized in the poem. All the emotions and feelings of the female self are crushed down because of her ‘introduction’ to the male world by means of marriage. The forceful opening of the poem, “I don’t know politics but I know the names/Of those in power,” is a pathetic revelation of the poet’s looking back to her own self which is ruthlessly tortured by “politics” and “power” of the man with whom he is supposed to live.

In the process of articulating man-woman/male-female relationship, language as a mode of expression of feelings and emotions plays a vital role. Language as a trope creates bondage of post-coloniality which can also be related to marital relationship. The husband has a better ‘voice’ which does not allow the ‘subaltern’ wife to ‘speak.’ Language is basically male-oriented. This is given a great challenge by Das when she becomes unhesitating in declaring that: “Why not let me speak in any language I like?” The postcolonial object-formation and an attempt to reduce the weaker one to the submissive position can be found well articulated in the voice of protest of the poet who becomes ironic in saying that her language may be of a hybridity of Indian and English, yet it is absolutely her own through which she can express her heart-felt desires and emotions unequivocally. It is not the expression of any rehearsed language. It is a mode of deconstruction of the earlier accepted motif in the society. In fact, Kamala Das is both a user of myth of marriage and also a maker of a new myth of marriage and love.

Right at the inception of the poem, Das has asserted her power to speak out through any mode she likes. She is able to make it clear that it is not so easy to silence her voice. But the underlying irony is that assertiveness of this self-possessed female self is gradually being faded away by the pressure of patriarchal code of conduct. She is not allowed to speak. Her body grows up but her intellectual capacity/power is not granted to flourish in the same way.

The poem shows how the growth of physicality of the girl corresponds to that of the growth and demand of the male 'desire':

I was a child, and later they  
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs  
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.

Thus she becomes an object of male 'sex.' Few women poets have the power to dramatize the sexual relationship so cryptically as Das:

For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the  
Bedroom and closed the door.

The psycho-sexual tormentation of the girl is revealed in a telling expression: "The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me." She relies on the speech of the mind, not that of the brain which is the weapon of the persons in power with whom she has already waged a war. That is why she can unburden the muted versions of her heart in so frank and confessional manner which can shake the very foundation of patriarchy. The way Kamala Das has categorized the stages of tortures upon her can well be equated with the cunningness and the piercing power of the colonizer upon a newly conquered foreign land. A series of injunctions – dressing in saris, behaving as a wife, doing embroidery and even quarrelling with servants – have been imposed upon her to make herself "fit in" in a newly planted soil of her husband's house. The very naturalness of the female psyche is not allowed to grow in the foreign land in which the husband is the absolute ruler. But yet here again the subaltern can speak well against the categorization of any fixed "name, a role." When such expressions as:

Don't sit  
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.  
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better  
Still, be Madhavikutty,

we can find enough similarity with Taslima Nasreen, another subaltern writer who faces a lot of such injunctions as presented in her autobiographical writings.

The postcolonial approach to the poem reveals an important aspect – that of land-body analogy. The conquering of a foreign land by the colonizer is compared with the conquering of the foreign body (wife) by the husband. The husband is initially viewed as a man, an individual who is transmitted into an every man – the universal one, thereby positing a fact that as the colonizer has no colour of his own, the husbands are all alike. The micro-world of colonization is cinematographically presented by Das with an acute power of observing the evils of marital transactions. The systematically categorized suppression of

womanhood by the patriarchal power is akin to the postcolonial legacy. In fact, Kamala Das depicts the situation of a woman in love as one who is suffering in a labyrinth of marriage as an institutional power-house. She is not allowed to cry even when betrayed in love. The betrayal is similar to that of losing one's self-respect and dignity in the hands of the imperialist. She says that the man "wants" a woman, but a woman "seeks love." The contrast is between "woman" and "love" – one is denotative of body and the other is the signifier of emotion. The love-relation between the husband and the wife as depicted in the poem, is based on commercialism and consumerism. The use of the word "sword" in the expression "he is tightly packed like the/ Sword in its sheath," places before our eyes the image of a conqueror. This military metaphor is related to the concept of the subaltern issues. The condition of the wife in the hand of the husband is analogous to the condition of a native with his master. The lady is being repeatedly constructed, re-constructed and ultimately left off into a state of being de-constructed. The speaker of the poem tries to voice forth the very basic idea that a woman is, as she is culturally constructed. She is an 'other,' an object only. This has been well articulated through such denotative words as "sari" (a marker of female oppression) and "shirt" and "trouser" (such words being used as signifying women liberation). But the poem expresses that no such real emancipation from male bondage is possible unless any drastic change, both culturally and socially, is to take place. Thus in accordance with de Beauvoir it may be said that the husband is positioned in the domestic sphere as the Subject, the Absolute, and the wife is the Other.

Kamala Das has repeatedly denied the charge of glorifying sex in her poetical canon. In an interview, as found in *The Rediff Interview*, she says, "I have not glorified lust." What she has glorified is the intrinsic beauty of the body and the cravings for love of the wretched women. In one respect the condition of the speaker of Das's poem is akin to the condition of Tendulkar's Benare in *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1978). Hence, the configuration is between love and lust. The woman is essentially colonized in the domain of lust of a man. The beloved is not allowed any emotional relationship in the micro-world of marriage as the Subalterns are neglected in the macro-world of culture and politics. The depiction of the speaker in "An Introduction" hauntingly awakens us to the consciousness of a 'captive lady,' one who is allowed to live "freely" only with domestic chores. She is seen as suffering within the obnoxious network of power as propagated by Foucault. The unexpressed cry of anger has been finely dramatized in the poem to rouse the consciousness of the patriarchy. When Anisur Rahman opines that Kamala Das is "less an artist than a human being" (qtd. in *de Souza* 8), we discern that he pays much attention to the personal sufferings of a female heart

(psyche) only, but we cannot totally agree with him that “she is less an artist.” The artistic quality of the poem lies in its manipulation of simple vocabulary which comes directly from the emotional terrain of a woman who is treated just as a machine of child birth, an object of male ego-satisfaction. R.K.Singh in the essay “Expression of Anger and Sexuality in Recent Indian Women Poets” (*Contemporary Indian literature in English: A Humanistic Perspective*) views that Kamala Das’s is a “basic struggle of the soul, mind and body to comprehend life, to create verbal forms for delight and illumination” (120).

Das dreams of another India where the female body would be free from the oppressive male gaze and the patriarchal violence that it postulates. Here women will not have to be mere role players assigned to them by the conventions of the society and the canons of literature. They should be allowed to live as true human beings with all possible dimensions, with spiritual and real human rapport with other persons.

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