

Kamala Das' 'An Introduction' as a Reflection of Modern Indian Woman

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Abstract:

Kamala Das is a famous modern Indian writer evoking feminism through her works. She wrote intensely personal poems based on her own experiences. It is a revolutionary and unfiltered expression of a staunch feminist. It is an attempt to cover vast areas of political, social, cultural and emotional outbursts of an Indian woman. The voice in the poem is of a modern conscious feminist, aware of her own identity and surroundings. The narrator clearly and directly confesses her innermost feelings, passions and wishes. She is very honest, bold and unapologetic in her stand to become a person which she desires. She tries to free herself from the shackles of the cultural and social role demanded by the orthodox patriarchy. She directly addresses the social taboo topics like love, passion, lust, gender bias and female sexuality. In her poem, Das is also willing to challenge the norms and rules set by the conventional and highly patriarchal society. The conversational and confessional style of writing 'An Introduction' shows her personal struggles, which has universal appeal. She puts forth the issue of the exploitation of women in social, cultural and political spheres of life. The physical and the mental agony of the females is aptly described by Kamala Das.

Keywords: position of women, gender, sexuality, exploitation, victimization.

Introduction:

Kamala Das is a well-known poet in modern Indian English literature. She was born in a high-class family in Kerala. Her mother was a poet and her father was a journalist and an executive in an automobile company. She started her literary career very early. But due to her early marriage at fifteen, she moved to Bombay (now Mumbai) with her husband. She dealt with the themes of gender and sexuality in the context of the patriarchal Indian society. The position of women in Indian society is the major issue put forth by her. She has narrated her personal experiences in her writings making it autobiographical and confessional in tone and style. She wrote openly and frankly about the sexual desires of women. As an Indian author, she has shared her experiences of being a typical Indian woman. Her poetry collections included *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967) and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973). She received many literary awards, including the Asian World Prize for Literature in 1985.

"An Introduction" by Kamala Das was first published in 1965 in the collection of poetry named 'Summer in Calcutta'. It is considered as a pioneer of the Indian feminist movement. It explores the themes of gender roles, sexuality and female victimization in the patriarchy. The physical, mental and psychological exploitation of women is aptly portrayed through the rebellious narrator. The complex human emotions, especially that of an adolescent girl and housewife is focused to show mirror to the society. The oppression faced by women in the marital system is staunchly attacked. If a woman rejects these patriarchal norms and tries to free herself from this bondage, she is labeled as rebel and became an outcast. The continuous struggle of a woman from her birth to prove her individuality and desire for freedom is aptly depicted in this poem. The poet-rebel emerges out of the ashes of the rejection, exploitation and subjugation of the societal constraints.

The Paper:

The poem is entitled as 'An introduction' in which Kamala Das introduces herself as a person with free will, self-respect and self-esteem. She portrays herself as a modern woman, defiant to the social norms. She attacks on the victimization of women and their identity-crisis. She reiterates the phrase "I am" to show her exploitation, gender-biased, feminine sexuality and struggle for survival. The first few lines of the poem throws light on the constraints put on girls, the chains that denies forward movement, the restrictions to curtail her personal, emotional and mental development

and the big walls of social position of women. Through her words, phrases, metaphors and images, the poem unfolds the inclinations and personality of the poet. She is a modern person who would not endure pain, but would fire back against all odds of life. The later part of the poem focuses on the cosmic love experienced by the lovers. The sufferings, pains and griefs are shared by both along with the joys, happiness and gaiety.

This poem is autobiographical in nature, modern in style and confessional in tone. It is straightforward, outspoken and bitter. It searches the deep, secret, inmost chambers of a female mind and attempts to show the outer taming image of a woman. To get her meaning clear, Kamala Das has utilized proper words, phrases, mind-catching images and symbols.

The poem opens with:

I don't know politics but I know the name

Of those in power, and can repeat them like

Days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru. (Lines 1-3)

The speaker in the poem is the poet, Kamala Das herself. She starts the poem with the comparison of her apprehension of politics and the knowledge about the political leadership with the days of the weeks and months of the year. She may not have a solid hold on the politics, but she can recollect the persons who are in politics. She begins with the first name of India's first Prime Minister, Nehru. She vividly remembers his emergence to the power and his work as a Prime Minister of the independent India. He is an individual with national and international recognition. Through this, she attacks the male dominance in politics. The reason behind her remembering the politicians is that they were in power again and again, for many years. They were not challenged by anyone. Everyone had acknowledged them as their leaders recurrently. These male political leaders relish on the irresistible power in the modern Indian society. This statement is ironical with implied contrast between her own nonexistence and the powerful male political leaders. Men like Nehru have attribute to move the world with their power-packed personality or identity. They have ample choices and can take decisions. She tries to throw light on the fact that politics is a game of only a few elites who governs democracy. The same political leaders are in power over and over again. That is the justification behind everyone clearly memorizing their names.

Kamala Das goes on introducing herself as an 'Indian, very brown person from Malabar'. Her hometown is Malabar which is in Southwest India. She is proud of being Indian, but at the same time, she accepts people commenting on her colour. She is very brown suggests that the colour discrimination which prevails even in the modern Indian society. The Indians usually regard a fair girl as more beautiful than a brown or dark-skinned girl. Kamala Das has indicated on this orthodox mindset of the patriarchy. After providing this basic information, she talks about 'languages known' to her. She elaborates that she can speak three languages- her mother-tongue, Malayalam, Kannada and the world language, English. But she can write in two languages, Malayalam and English and she can dream in one language, Malayalam. She continues to describe the importance of languages in her life. But, she feels terrible for being criticized for writing in English as it is not her mother-tongue. No one supports her writing and speaking English. Everyone is against her usage of the foreign language, English. Her family, cousins and the society does not like her writing in English. She is misjudged for speaking and writing in English. English was a colonial language which was used by the colonizers, the British. They used English as a means of communication and to establish power over the Indians. So all attack her and she felt lonely and heart-broken. But she raises the question why should they care about what she speaks or writes. She is proud of her use of the language, the deep connection with words, phrases and its implicit meanings. She gives importance to the content, expressions, emotions while using a language, rather than the medium of the language. The comfort of expressing her thoughts, feelings, etc. is more important to her. She is blamed for distorting the language, English. But she stresses that the imperfection and strangeness of the language is altogether her own. The vocabulary of the language becomes her own with all its faults.

She uses the language which maybe half English, half Indian, but it is genuine and human, filled with emotions. There is wit in this combination of words, phrases, sentences and language marked by half Indian and half English. This is curious, but she knows that it is true, from the bottom of her heart. The fact is that the language used by her is in its crude form. What makes it more human, is its imperfections. It is natural for any person not to use flawless language. She wishes for credibility and honesty in her writing and speech. The language she uses, reflects her as a human being, a credible personality. Her mind can see and hear each and every word of her speech or text. She is aware of her deep down emotions and wants freedom through the use of her voice. The language is the tongue of her sentiments and expressions. She uses the metaphor of cawing crows and roaring lions for her human speech. It is incomplete, but not deaf or blind expression of her head or heart. It is also not incoherent like the mutterings of funeral pyres. It has its own integral natural coherence.

She continues her story in which strangers told her that she is grown-up. She feels older than her age as everyone around her tell so. They talk about the bodily changes that make her an adolescent. She was told that she has grown as her limbs swelled and in one or two parts of her body, hair sprouted. But she is childish at heart. She is not a mature woman. Due to this pressure, she couldn't understand what to ask for. So she asked to be loved and so was married to a person who took pleasure in sensual love. She felt miserable with this kind of sexual love. She could not bare the weight of her female body parts and felt crushed. She could not held the insistence of her husband and society. She was left ashamed by her husband and her family. On the contrary, she could not have any choice, but has to marry a person almost double her age, just at fifteen. She couldn't cope up with this marriage or her husband. She felt deceived as she couldn't get the love she craved. Her husband is a typical patriarch who takes advantage of her

female features in guise of love. She would not cope up with this role of a docile, downtrodden wife. She was advised to do womanly works like cooking, doing embroidery and quarreling with servants. She is considered as the weaker sex and so the stronger sex, a man tries to dominate and rule her with his physical, mental and economical strength. Her husband considers himself as superior to his wife. She is expected to be a devoted wife and complete all her household chores, sincerely. She is hoped to be a good cook and handle everything at home. She should be a typical Indian, obedient wife who would follow the footsteps of her husband. She should accept him with all his strengths and weaknesses. She should be ready to do anything for him. He always concentrates on his own development and disregards her emotions and self respect. He purposefully overlooks her intelligence, poetic brilliance, emotions and expectations. She is devoid of every pleasure and right as a human being. She is regarded as the secondary or subordinate to the male with whom she had tied knot. She is powerless, spiritless, sentimental, mild and loyal. She feels very bad and cannot withstand this humiliation as a woman. She tries to resist these attempts of exploitation and victimization by her husband, her family and the society.

In India, women are considered only as a commodity and a servant wife. She is not considered as a human being, but is just a play thing in the hands of her male partner. She is expected to lead her life according to his wishes. She must fulfill all his dreams and desires and never talk about her own feelings, thoughts and opinions. She must shut her mouth and follow all the orders of her husband. Her desire to gain freedom is curtailed by circumstances which are out of control. This incident throws light on the child-marriage. A sixteen-year old girl is not prepared physically and mentally for the attack on her body by her male partner. She felt ashamed of herself, she pitied on her femininity. Thus her sorrow is clearly shown in the lines of the poem "An Introduction". It has affected her wish for freedom. She only could feel her womanly body as a burden. Her female parts are so massive as to crush weight on her life. This pressure led to physical, mental and emotional shrinking. It made her unhappy as her sweet dream of love is completely broken. So she decided to get rid of this female image which injured her and destroyed her positivism, vitality and energy. She is ready to recreate her own image.

She tried to overcome this embarrassment by altering herself. She became tomboyish by cutting her hair short and wearing her brother's trousers. She covered her feminine body by wearing male clothes. The preserver of patriarchy, pressed her to wear traditional female attire. They wished to bound her to the domestic routine, to become a housewife, a mother and a woman. But she remade her identity by denying the traditional role of a woman. She would never fit in the socio-cultural role by not dressing in saris and not listening to the counsel of the so-called preservers of social norms, culture and tradition. She wished to enlarge her horizon of experiences. She moved herself beyond the typical, conventional womanly life. She strived to spread out her personality and show her presence in the world.

The people in the society told her to call herself Amy or Kamala or better still Madhavikutti. She wanted to get identification as a poet by taking the pen-name, Madhavikutti. They urged her not to show herself as a sex-crazy woman, split personality with psychological disorder. She should not play pretending games or cry awfully loud. She is supposed to be calm, quiet, mild, obeying and content. Thus, Kamala Das focuses on the exploitation and victimization of women, social injustice and male dominance in the typical patriarchal Indian society. She, herself is a victim of the materialistic, modern society. She shows the submissive position and a very bad treatment given to the women in the male-dominant society. But then she tries to transform herself from a compromising housewife into the awareness of feminine ideology. She expresses her inmost desires. She reacts against the injustices met by herself in the institution of marriage. She wishes to throw away the restraints put on her by the marriage system and escape from the servile position as a woman. Actually, it is the lady of the house who takes care of all the homely chores. She is the anchor of the family and booster of her husband. She is the better-half in the actual sense of the term. The speaker in the poem, finally realizes her worth as a powerful, modern woman. She begins to value her life, her self-respect and her self-esteem. She determines to take control of her life.

Towards the end of the poem, she refers to a man who claimed to love her. The speaker does not refer to the name of the man who promised to love her. He represents the man who gratifies himself at the cost of the female who adore him. At the height of her emotions, she asked the man about his identity. He simply says, "It is I". Thus the "I" represents the male who wishes to gain what he desires. He is the authority to take decisions for himself and others like his wife and family. The use of the pronoun "I" shows the power held by men in the society. The "I" is always around her, in one way or the other. He is present anywhere and everywhere. He could go and drink and can move on the roads at midnight also. He would also stay in the lodge and eat in a restaurant alone in strange towns. He is free from fear and care. No one would scold him for his reckless behaviour. None would criticize him for his rash conduct. He is a person who is master of his life. He can make, remake or break, re-break his life. He can take his own decisions and is responsible for his own deeds. The speaker seeks to become independent woman and create her own identity like this "I". As the lines of the poem comes to concluding remarks, this gap between the speaker and the "I" is blurring. She wishes to be free from the constraints put by her family and the society. She feels trapped by the worldly pressures of being a woman and her inward desire to be a free person. She would be able to handle herself and create her own identity, both as a sinner and as a saint. She states that her aches belongs to herself and no one else could feel it. Thus, the final statement is of resistance and protest. It suggests that she too can become the "I". She would deal with her own life according to her own rules and regulations. She would not follow the norms of the society. She is ready to take the responsibility of her own decisions, good or fatal. She is the person who is self-made and confident. She would like to enjoy the power of "I". She is completely happy to be herself, without disturbance or influence of the others. She is a new woman with new ideals, principles and rules of her own.

The ego of being male with the power to subjugate female, is shown through this poem. The man feels proud of his existence as a domineering person. He is the head of the family and caretaker of its members. So his egotism grows and reflects in his behaviour towards his wife. The traditional role of a husband is to show his power over female, to harass her, to exploit her and to suffocate her. He considers his wife as his property to handle according to his own wishes and needs. He loves her, but the love is also not always pure or passionate, it lacks something. So the woman feels sometimes being loved and sometimes being betrayed. The speaker also says that she is not different from other human beings. She is sometimes pious and sometimes sinful like any other human. She reveals her own identity both as a saint and as a sinner. She has the same joys in her life as every other person and she undergoes the similar disappointments with which the other fellows also suffer. She is trapped between her intense need to be a free person and the attitude of the world which subdues her. She bares the aches which belongs to no one else, but only restricted to herself. She can't deny this fact, but resists against it. Thus, she can also be the "I" in the poem who is not caged and do anything without bothering about others. This "I" is a carefree and self-made person who wishes to create her own identity in this vast world.

Conclusion:

Through 'An Introduction', Kamala Das tries to throw light on the the situation of women in the contemporary society. The patriarchy controls the total life of women. The marriage system has given prominent role to the male counterpart who makes his wife a showpiece, a doll and a maid. Women are told what to wear, how to walk and talk and what to do and not to do. Her freedom is curtailed and she is subjugated. Kamala Das explores the complex feelings and countless sufferings and oppression of women. She raised the voice against it and has rebelled against the norms of the typical Indian male-dominated society. Thus, she played a spectacular role in the establishment of the Indian feminist movement.

'An Introduction' is a poem of protest, rebel and resistance. The narrator in the poem is in conflict with the patriarchy. At the same time, she faces internal conflict about her own identity. She behaves tomboyish, tries to break the shackles of the society and wishes to establish herself as a poet and a fearless human being. She breaks silence on the taboo subjects like sexuality and mental well-being. She has thrown away social restrictions, marriage constraints and promoted equal rights and opportunities for women. Thus, she emerges as a staunch feminist and a modern, new woman, ready to fight the bourgeois norms.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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