

A Study of Women Empowerment and Equal Rights in the Poems of Kamala Das

Prof. Pratibha Saraswat

Assistant Professor, Department of English, SICA College, Indore

Abstract: Kamala Das is one of the most revolutionary poets in Indian English Literature. Her poems describe the plight of Indian women with utmost honesty. The aim of this study is to critically analyse the call for identity and equality of rights for women as expressed in the poems of Kamala Das. Women empowerment and sexual freedom has been an important topic of contemplation of women writers. In the context of India, this topic is even more relevant. Not much is written about gender equality, sexual freedom, and women empowerment in patriarchal India. In this scenario the works of Kamala Das on freedom of expression of women is of utmost importance. She was being labelled as a bold and controversial writer. She talked about women's femininity and search for self-identity with great ease and conviction. The physical and mental stress on women in her poems, can be visualised as an effort to get closer to self –identity and for herself as a woman. She is a revolutionary poet in the true sense of the word. Her influence on Indian English poetry is tremendous. She was hailed as “the mother of Modern Indian English poetry” by The Times.

Introduction

Kamala Das was born on 31 March, 1934 in Kerala, India. She was an Indian English writer of great repute. A prolific writer, she was known for her open discussions of women's sexual lives. She was popularly known by her one-time pen name Madhavikutty. She wrote under the name of Kamala Das in English. Kamala Das was an Indian English Poet as well as a great Malayalam author from Kerala. She wrote in Malayalam as well in English. Her popularity is chiefly based on her short stories and autobiography, “My Story”. She was a well known columnist and wrote on different topics like love, lust, politics, women empowerment and self-identity. Her voice is the voice of several women who stroved hard to create a niche for themselves in a world dominated by men. Her poems talk about the sexual parity and other vices that are dominantly visible in our society.

She wrote openly about female sensuality and sexuality, for which she was marked as an iconoclast. She challenged the wrong cherished beliefs of the dominance of men and advocated for the rights of women. Her poems were like a fresh breeze that was a need of that time, when women were trying to find a place for themselves.

Works - She wrote in Malayalam and English. Her poetic collections in English include “Summer in Calcutta” (1965), “The Descendants” (1967), “The Old Playhouse and the Other Poems” (1973), and “Only the Soul Knows How to Sing” (1996). Apart from her writings in English, her autobiography “My Story” in Malayalam has been published in English. She held many prestigious positions in her career: She was the vice chairperson of Kerala Sahitya Academy, Chairperson of Kerala Forestry Board, President of the Kerala Children's Film Society, and Editor of the Illustrated Weekly of India and Editor of “Poet Magazine”.

Kamala Das started writing at a very early age. She got married at the age of 15 to Madhava Das. He encouraged her to write. Due to her frank and novel views on various topics, she became a renowned name in Calcutta in the early 60s. She was different from other writers of that time and questioned the rules and old beliefs of her time. In her poems, she threw light on the plight of women of her day though times have changed but feelings are still the same. Her poems are still relevant in current times. In her poems, she questions the status and rights of women in male dominated society. Why should only men rule the world and not women? In 'An Introduction', she writes;

"I don't know politics but I know the names
Of those, in power, and can repeat them like the
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with
Nehru."

Politics in India has always been in the hands of a few male politicians, and their impact is so powerful that she can repeat their names like the days of week or month. These lines show how men have never given right to women to serve their country. Power remains in the hands of a few people and women are always sidelined. A women's liberty to think and act the way she deserves has been a recurrent theme in Kamala Das' poetry. She advocates freedom of thought and action in her poems. She stresses upon the freedom of speech for women in her poem, An Introduction:

"Don't write in English, they said, English
is
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting
Cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak
in
Any language I like?"

The choice to do anything should be of the individual and others should not interfere in that periphery. She had complete sway on her choices. No one had a right to decide what the other person should do in his or her own life. She talks about the power that is inherent in a woman. She can decide which language she wants to use. She decided to write in English where she chose English as her preferred medium of writing which was opposed by some people. In her poem An Introduction, she says:

"The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its
Queerness
All mine, mine alone

Her works make her a forerunner of women empowerment. Women empowerment is the ability for women to assert themselves and enjoy their basic fundamental rights. It means to stand up against the control of other people and live life on their own terms. She daringly talks about sexuality of women without any fear of what others will think or say and is not afraid of telling the truth and hiding it behind curtains. She wrote poems on marriage, love, sex, lust and gave voice to the grievance and sorrows of every woman of our country. Women desire compassion and love. But instead, she is drawn to bed and made to endure what she is not willing to do. Don't women have the right to take decisions for themselves:

“When I asked for love, not knowing

What else to ask

For, he drew of youth of sixteen into the

Bedroom and closed the door.” (An Introduction).

This life of suppression and meekness cannot be the life to be lived. Women also need space and the right to take charge of their lives. This is what Kamala Das advocates throughout her poems:

“Be Amy, or be Kamala, or, better

Still be Madhavikutty. It is time to

Choose a name, a role. Don't play

Pretending games.

Don't play at schizophrenia or be a

Nympho.” (Funeral Pyre)

She believed in the equality of men and women. They should both enjoy equality of status. A woman is not inferior to a man. How can someone be superior just because he is born a man? In her poems she has always stressed upon equality: equality of gender, equality of thought, equality of action and equality of choices:

“I am sinner,

I am saint. I am the beloved and the

Betrayed. I have no joys that are not

Yours, no

Aches which are not yours. I too call

Myself I”. (An Introduction)

Marriage is a sacred institution in India. But Kamala Das criticises the institution of marriage and particularly, the tradition of marrying off a girl to a person whom she does not know without her consent. For ages, women have been deprived of their right to choose their life partners. They usually have no say in these matters. But it is an injustice on the part of the women. They are stripped of this right to choose, to love and to marry a person of their choice.

“The Freaks” is one such poem where Kamala Das is very determined to revolt against what the common perception of society is about womanhood. The emotional emptiness and sterility of married life is the idea that is so explicit in her poems. The misery of wife is brought forth in the poem “The Freaks”, where she has to surrender to a husband who is repulsive and who is interested only in lovemaking:

“Can this man with

Nimble finger- tips unleash

Nothing more alive than the skin’s lazy hungers? Who can

Help us who have lived so long

And have failed in love?” (The Freaks).

Kamala Das initiates a new and honest age for women poets by giving them a new way to express their emotions and ideas which were denied to them before. She gave them power to assert, to stand for what they are and they care for. She is a poet of modern Indian women and their concerns. Her poems reflect a straight denial of the conventional form of male dominant culture and traditions. Kamala Das is truly a poet of freedom and liberty and conveys her views on liberty of women consistently in her poems. In this male dominated world she has the courage to talk about feminine sensibility. She is proud of her womanhood and she has no qualms to claim her femininity. She stands against the patriarchal society that has made women dependent on men. Her subservience leads to her misery. “The Looking Glass” by Kamala Das is one such poem where she talks about the problems that a woman faces because of being a woman:

“ Oh yes, getting

Getting a man to love is easy but living

Without him afterwards may have to be

Faced. A living without life when you move

Around, meeting strangers, with your eyes that

Gave up their search, with ears that hear only

His last voice calling out your name and your

Body which once under his touch had gleamed

Like burnished brass, now drab and destitute.” (The Looking Glass).

Kamala Das is very critical of the society, and in her poems, she has made it a point to question the traditions and customs that make a woman depend upon a man for her entire life. A woman is not weak; she is strong. But our society has made such customs, traditions and rituals that promote only a woman’s subservience to a man. Through her poems she sought answers to such questions which were not asked so freely before. Kamala Das has given voice to this prolonged silence of the sufferings of women.

She exposed hypocrisy and orthodoxy in matters of love and faith in our society. By writing for the cause of women, Kamala Das became a revolutionary writer for the women of the modern world. The subjects of her works depict revolutionary themes such as, “What Women Expect Out of Marriage and What They Get” and “Why Not More Than One Husband”. She strongly talks about women’s contribution in society. Through her poems, she encourages women to give up their silence and give vent to their innermost feelings and emotions.

Kamala Das is rightly considered to be the poet who rebels against the established traditions of patriarchal India. Her voice is the voice of the rebel Indian women who scrutinises the silence of Indian women and hammers the pillars of male domination through her fiery poetry. In India, talking about sex is a taboo but being a rebel, she uses this as a weapon of protest. In the true sense of the word, her poetic sensibility touches upon theme of empowerment to women.

References:

- 1. Kamala Das Poems. www.poemshunter.com**
- 2. www.kkhsou.in**