



**A BLEND OF FEMINISM AND POST-MODERNISM: KAMLA DAS'S POETIC
WORLD**

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Abstract

According to Toril Moi, "In a general way, I see 'feminism' as a political position, 'femaleness' as a matter of biology, and 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristic."

Many historians have categorized women writers in three categories. The first category consists of writers like Jane Austen, Bronte Sisters and others. The second category includes writers like Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and many others. The first category of writers have struggled to be simply acknowledged in the intelligentsia while the second group has revolted against the male oriented society and sought to establish an isolated world away from the males. The third group has maintained a balance between the above two extremes by being both feminine and feminist at the same time. This group of writers have also less talked about the social or political freedom and never visualized a world existing without men. Kamla Das is a part of this third category. In her poetic world throughout one could easily find a plea for understanding and compassion from the male counterpart. This paper attempts to find a blend between feminism and postmodernism in the poetry of Kamla Das.

Key Words: Feminism, feminine, feminist, femininity, women writing, social and political freedom



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Between Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (18 April 1809 – 26 December 1831) and Nissim Ezekiel (16 December 1924 - 9 January 2004) we have only a few Indian English poets such as Kashi Prasad Ghosh, Michael Madhu Sudan Dutt, Aru Dutt, Toru Dutt, and Sarojini Naidu.

Three poets only stand out of all these as significant contributors to poetry – they are, Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and Sri Aurobindo. These three are our most well known and substantial poets in the Pre-Independence era.

The completely poetic scenario changed with the advent of our Independence and the establishment of Commonwealth group of nations in the post-1950 period. When Leeds University established a Chair for commonwealth Literature in 1958 and started imparting it as a course, Indian English Literature became a part of it. Thus, Indian English poetry came to be viewed both as an Indian literature and simultaneously as a part of Commonwealth literature. Nissim Ezekiel became the first modern Indian English poet in the Post-Independence period and his book of poems *A Time to Change* can be said to herald modernism in Indian English poetry.

Indian English poetry as a distinct genre emerged in the works of Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das and A. K. Ramanujan in the nineteen sixties. Ezekiel's *The Unfinished Man* in 1960 and *The Exact Name* in 1965, Kamala Das' *Summer in Calcutta* in 1965 and A. K. Ramanujan's *Striders* in 1966 herald a new era for Indian English poetry. The luxuriant growth of Indian English poetry occurred in mid-seventies with the publication of R. Parthasarathy's ably chosen and edited anthology titled, *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets* in 1976. This anthology can be said to have marked the beginning of postmodernism in Indian English poetry. This anthology was quickly followed by individual collection of poems such as Nissim Ezekiel's *Hymns in Darkness* (1976) and Shiv K. Kumar's *Subterfuges* (1977). Thus, the Indian English poetry started to win recognition both at home and abroad.

When the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi honoured Indian English poets with its Annual Award the Indian English poetry gained academic acclaim. Soon it was prescribed as a course at several Indian universities and abroad. Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi has honored seven Indian English poets with its Annual award in the post-1980 period. If Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* marks postmodernism in Indian English fiction, the works of the above-mentioned poets can be said to embody the characteristics of postmodernism and post-colonialism in the last two decades of the twentieth century. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyze the poetry of Kamla Das who have enriched Indian English literature and made it acceptable to the west.

Kamala Das, is the second important Indian English poet to appear on the poetic scene after Ezekiel with the publication of her book of verse *Summer in Calcutta* (1965) in the post-

colonial era. She is also the fourth Indian English poet to win the Sahitya Akademi Award for her book, *Collected Poems* (Volume I) in 1985. She has published two volumes of poems- *Collected Poems Vol. I* (1984) and *Only the Soul knows How to Sing* (1996) – in the post-1980 era. Her imaginative world derives its power to involve the reader from its rich mimetic content while its enduring quality comes from verbal imagery drawn from many sources. Thus, she grapples with ideas and abstractions, images of men and women on several planes, the complex of emotions centering round human activities such as love, sex, companionship and problems relating to her won art.

Summer in Calcutta (1965) opens with the poem “The Dance of the Eunuchs” which sets the tone (of irony) and temper of the entire volume. There are many poems on the theme of love, but few that speak of the glory belonging to an exalting love-experience. “The Dance of the Eunuchs” objectifies, through an external, familiar situation, the poet’s strangled desire within. It was written against the background of the poet’s sudden contact with ‘a man who had hurt me when I was fourteen years old;’ she wanted ‘to get him at any cost.’ The poem is powerful and bold indeed, and displays an admirable sense of proportion in the use of imagery and metaphor.

The next poem, “The Freaks,” paints a rather helpless situation when the man is passive and the woman is burning with desire, but she is helpless. It is about ‘a grand, flamboyant lust.’ “The Freaks” is a remarkable lyric extracted from *Summer in Calcutta* and is to be marked for its abnormally psychological situation in lovemaking and its unredeemed helplessness and deep despair. The title itself suggests these things. The ‘freak’ is one who is capricious and whimsical in behavior, one who does not behave in accordance with the accepted norm. The title suggests that the lovers – the woman and her man – do not behave properly with each other, and hence are abnormal and whimsical in their approach to love.

‘He’ in the poem is the man persona and ‘me’ is the woman persona. They are together in a room. The lover talks and turns his reddened face towards her. However, he is not like the lover fairy tale; he is rather repulsive to her. His cheeks are ‘sustained’ and brownish in colour; his mouth is ugly and look like a ‘dark cavern’ his teeth are ‘uneven’ and calciferous. Evidently, these details are given here to show the woman’s disgust with the man. She seems to be tied to him socially, though personally she does not like him. Kamala Das in her poem expresses her idea against arranged marriages that are usually inspired by a parent’s conveniences more than those of the couples are. The poet, therefore, paints an abhorrent picture of her man, with who

she has to enter into sexual intercourse willy-nilly for a satisfaction. In such a situation, no partner feels happy and jovial except for physical contact; it offers no emotional contact between the man and the woman. Her deep sense of personal agony and despair exposes in these lines. Her situation becomes even more pathetic because there is no escape from it. She is utterly helpless and hopeless.

The man puts his hand on her knee in an apparent gesture of lovemaking. And though they are inclined to make love each other, they simply can't do so. As their minds, or least the woman wanders away. The phrase 'puddles of desi' denotes that the loves are smitten by the arrows of love, that their love is full of dirt and filth, and not pure and emotion Where there is no meeting – point for the two hearts, the min will definitely go astray. This is precisely Kamla Das's own situation – a situation that is described as 'a rat helpless situation' by Devinder Kohli.

The woman-persona is filled with utter disgust at the fail of her lover, who can touch her with nimble fingertips to soothe her. Possibly her sexual hunger also remains unfulfilled nothing to speak of the yearnings of the heart for truer love closer understanding.

As a poet, Kamala Das makes ample use of images and symbols. Some of these images are so recurrent that they become symbols in her poetry, but it must be added here that they are not too many. A study of here imagery and symbolism is bound to reveal her artistic skill and craftsmanship, and hence it is both relevant and rewarding. Henceforth we will examine some of her dominant and recurrent images and symbols.

Kamala Das makes a hectic search for true love in her poetry and her personal predicament is reflected in it. She is a poet of love and sex and of the body. One of the dominant images in like the American poet, Walt Whitman, and regards it as a gift of God to the human race. It is often viewed in two aspects – male and female. While the male body is a source of corruption and exploitation, the female body is a storehouse of beauty and chastity misused to the maximum. Here is a subtle analysis of the male physiology made with an aversion:

He talks, turning a sun-stained
Check to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern where gleam, his right
Hand on my knee...
...Can't this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash

Nothing more alive than the
Skins' lazy hungers ?

("The Freaks," *Summer in Calcutta*, 10)

Another poem "In Love" brings the poet face to face with the "titillation and fulfillment" has completely evaded her. Therefore, in great despair, she asks the questions.

Who can
Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in love?

("The Freaks," *Summer in Calcutta*, 10)

The heart remains 'an empty cistern', and like a dry well devoid of the waters of life, it harbours only 'coiling snakes of silence.' As a result, her impatience touches a new height. The man remains largely passive and slack, mocking at her 'feminine integrity.' She has, therefore, to don the masculine role and flaunt integrity.' She has, therefore, to don the masculine role and flaunt 'a grand, flamboyant lust' at times in order to save her femininity. Though here last is grand and flamboyant, it is not real and genuine.

Kamla Das's feminine sensibility finds its true and fullest expression in her love poems. Indian sensibility is transparent in her poetry and the use of Radha Krishna myth makes it more appealing to the Indian readers. Krishna, the eternal lover is a living consciousness among Indians and the epitome of love. The utterance of His name brings joy to millions of people in India. In a poem called 'Ghanashyam', Kamala Das invokes Lord Krishna with a heart filled with devotion and joy.

Kamla Das as a post-colonial poet has made an effort to create an Indian identity by way of resisting and subverting the colonizer. Therefore, she makes an ample use of national myths like Lord Krishna and Mira Bai. Mira Bai is a myth which has been very well exploited by the poet. The sudden disappearance of Mira, a devotee of Lord Krishna has become a living myth and legend in our country.

Kamla Das's poem on Calcutta is an outer landscape but it also presents an inner landscape of a frenzied and explosive woman in a city.

It is, however, clear from a large number of poems in *Summer in Calcutta* that Kamala Das's impersonal note or sense of universality is simply self-imposed and not natural for her. In

this volume, the personal moods and feelings triumph over the impersonal ones, for sustained universality is not within the poet's reach.

In the end, Prof. K. R. S. Iyengar rightly recognizes Kamala Das as "one of the most aggressively individualistic of the new poets" whose fiercely feminine sensibility enables her "to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world." Prof. Iyengar maintains that Mrs. Das gives "the impression of writing in haste," but that she reveals "a mastery of phrase and a control over rhythm - the words often pointed and envenomed too, and the rhythm so nervously, almost feverishly, alive." If Das's rhythm is 'feverish', her diction is charged with powder and her versification is technically accomplished.

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