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ADOPTION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE: AN INSTRUMENT TO COUNTER PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION IN THE WORKS OF KAMALA DAS

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Abstract

In the initial days of post-colonial India the acceptance of English language as a medium of expression in literary works was seen against Nationalistic approach. In that juncture Kamala Das's (1934-2009) adoption of English language over her mother tongue Malayalam was considered an audacious act. And this was due to the fact that being a woman she choose powerful English language as her medium of writing. In my paper I've tried to show the probable reasons behind Das's use of English language in delivering her literary works. Among numerous reasons the most important one is the dominating nature of this language that helps Das to release the suppressed self of being a woman. English language has a masculine nature and using it according to someone's needs require inherent power. And the same in case of Das becomes really a matter of audacity as she challenges the male-dominated society in her works.

Keywords: Indian Writing in English, Feminism, Gender Study, Confessional Poems.

Kamala Das (1934-2009), a bilingual writer of both Malayalam and English languages, is widely known as an Indian English Writer. She is considered as a seminal poet writing in Indian English. She started writing in a post-colonial India. Her first poem was published in 1947. That was a time when literature(s) of significant quantity and quality, as well, were being produced in numerous regional languages in India. In post-1947 scenario writing in Indian languages was considered having a nationalistic approach. Apart from this, there was a tendency to underestimate the value of literature written by an Indian in the English language as an inferior one. It was generally considered that

literature of seminal value could only be written in writer's mother language as according to them it was an impossible task to acquire other languages as a medium of spontaneous expression. The same argument was voiced by Buddhadeva Bose, a prominent Bengali writer and critic, in 1963, "Indo-Anglian poetry is a blind alley, lined with curio shops, leading nowhere" (415). And it was not Bose alone, there were other critics too who were thinking in the same manner.

K.R.S. Iyengar was well aware of the fact and in the formative years of Indian Writing in English (earlier known as Indo-Anglian Literature), when

there were the conflicting comments regarding the acceptance of this genre in the mainstream literature, he, in his pioneering book *Indian Writing in English*, made a herculean effort to incorporate the writers ranging from Rammohan Roy to the writers of the 1960's and 70's. This set of Indian writers of English have seminal values in their contributions to the field of literature. First and foremost, he, in the "Introduction" of the book, clinically diagnoses the issue regarding the non-acceptance of this type of writing in the contemporary society and further proceeds with the examples taken from influential personalities defending this set of writers writing in English. He quotes the words of Sri Aurobindo to save this literature from turning into a "parasite" one:

It is not true in all cases that one can't write first class things in a learned language. Both in French and English people to whom the language was not native have done remarkable work, although that is rare. What about Jawaharlal's autobiography? Many English critics think it first-class in its own kind; of course he was educated in an English public school, but I suppose he was not born to that language. Some of Toru Dutt's poems, Sarojini's, Harin's have been highly placed by good English critics, and I don't think we need be more queasy than Englishmen themselves... If first-class excludes everything inferior to Shakespeare and Milton that is another matter. I think, as time goes on, people will become more and more polyglot and these mental barriers will begin to disappear. (qtd 06)

This single quotation is enough to foresee the future of Indian Writing in English blossoming into the "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" and simultaneously, it negates the insulting undertone in the comments of the critic like Gordon Bottomley who is said to have labelled typical Indo-Anglian poetry as "Matthew Arnold in a Sari" (qtd in Iyenger 7). However Iyenger is optimistic enough to encourage use of English language:

The future of English is indeed immense , and as the human mind of the future

progressively acquires an international sweep, what is more likely than English rising to the highest heights and achieving a global comprehension, there by ending the half-real half-mythical East-West dichotomy once and for all.(7)

He agrees with those critics who give importance to the literary works written in one's own language. But at the same time he emphasizes with this mode of writing that engages English as a medium to express a writer's creative faculty, "It is even possible to be agreeably and fruitfully bilingual- as many have been, and many still are. But creative writing- whether in one's own or in an adopted language- calls for a truly dedicated spirit" (7).

Kamala Das's "An Introduction" is representative of her "aggressively individualistic" nature. It also demonstrates her protesting spirit that is often found in her literary oeuvre. Considering her just as a confessional or a feminist poet is in itself the incomplete interpretation of Das as a writer. Her works, especially her poems, require multifaceted type of reading which will open new vistas to have a proper understanding of her poems. We often found Das raising her voice against the patriarchal social-system in her poems. She raises questions against the patriarchy which has relegated women as a submissive one. These arguments in actuality counters the hegemonic discourse laid down by male dominated society. As her poems include very delicate details of her private life, they help readers to establish an idea about her personal life. At the same time her much debated autobiography *My Story* (1976) provides necessary details from her life to have a comprehensive guide regarding her personal life which treats Das as a victim in the hand of a male-centric society. Her early marriage to an aged man could not satisfy her longing for a romantic manifestation of marital relationship. It creates the gap between the couple which remains unbridgeable for a long time. Her desire for a man as a true lover of her as well as her awful experience in her marital life are portrayed in her poems . She rips apart the traditional socio-political value system that considers a woman a non-entity. Keeping aside the meek and submissive appearance of a stereotyped Indian woman, Das

established herself in her poems as a protesting persona. She, perhaps for the first time in Indian Writing in English, celebrates the joy of having physical union without any inhibition.

Opting English as a primary language in order to produce her works is another way of posting her protest against the patriarchal hegemony. As she is an equally successful writer in her mother language, her choice of English language over the other one can be considered strategic. In "An Introduction" Das vehemently declares her proposition and lashes out at the traditional practice of turning women into dwarf under the pressure of male ego. As the title suggests she introduces herself in this poem as an, "... Indian, very brown, born in / Malabar," (4-5) and she speaks in, "...three languages, write in / Two, dream in one"(5-6). She is very frank about her identity. And regarding the language she uses in her day to day life, she is well aware about the contemporary political issue about Indian Government's three language policy. Sanjukta Das describes the scenario:

The language issue-"Why not let me speak any language I like?"- is tied to the debates on language, raging in India at that time. The language conflict over the imposition of Hindi as the national language divided the southern state from the northern in the nineteen-sixties...In fact, in the January of 1965, scores of agitators, many of them university students died in street violence in Madras. This was the language riot over the imposition of Hindi as a national language. (70)

However, as this became a political issue the then government was forced to change the directive and introduced the three language policy which meant English, Hindi and a regional language. Das, well aware about the issue, goes even further in this poem and presses on the adoption of the English language. "An Introduction" is a poem which portrays Das's view about the situation a woman has to undergo in our society in a nutshell. Here she uninhibitedly discloses her life. And while disclosing that she raises her voice in support of adopting English language as a medium of challenging this

socio-political system. She finds English language as a medium to convert personal into political; private into social.

Das's adoption of this language gives her protest a broad outlook. English is supposed to be a masculine language and in the means of communication its use brings a smarter aspect out of the user. Though post-independence nationalistic approach tended to focus at the regional languages, the impact of English language was still there. Contemporary Intellectuals were making the most out of this language. But for Das, being a woman, the scenario was little bit different. Still, in India it is considered a matter of audacity for a woman writing in English language as English carries the masculine label. So, it is easily understandable that Das had to face strong reproaches at that time. In an interview with Merrily Weisbord, however, she clarifies her position against these negative minded critics:

"I'm a writer, that's true,"... "By the time I was six, I started filling a notebook with verses. Yet even today, learned professors in India say, 'This is not English, she has forgotten the word *the*. We should have each note rising out of *the* sea, out of *the* wind.' But it doesn't agree with my ears. (102)

In "An Introduction" she establishes her stand that she maintains throughout her writing career:

The language I speak

... voices my joys, my longings, my

Hopes, and it is as useful to me as cawing

Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it

Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is Here and not here, a mind that sees and hears and

Is aware... (10, 15-20)

She has imbibed the language and subconsciously found it as an instrument to counter oppression done to women. Weisbord continues the episode narrated mockingly by Das:

"You write the way you like it", I told Professor Ezekiel. 'My gait is different. I danced all that, professor. I want rhythm in

my writing. When I write a poem, I am speaking, moving, my mind is dancing. Notes come and go the rhythms like Sanskrit stanzas I know. With this language, which may seem distorted to you, I will bring out my emotions. I will lay them out as wares in a sweetmeat shop. If you don't like it, don't come as a buyer for my sweets. You go where English is "spake"! Go there, what is it to me?"(102)

To her English ceases to be the leftover of British rule. On the contrary it becomes the metaphor of the power in the hands of women.

She was familiar with this language from her schooldays when she was in a convent school in Calcutta. Since then she showed signs of being a future writer. Her mother was a renowned poet of Malayalam language. But it was her father whom she feared most. She in *My Story* gave several instances which show her father, a dedicated follower of Gandhi, behaving like an oppressor to his wife:

My father soon after the betrothal stipulated firmly that his wife was not to wear anything but Khaddar and preferably white or off-white. After the wedding he made her remove all the gold ornaments from her person, all except the 'mangalsutra'. (11)

Her father was a representative of the patriarchal society to which she belonged. She from her childhood days saw patriarchy playing the crude role of oppressor. In her marital life she found her husband playing the same role. However, the act of writing gave her that opportunity through which she could vent out her pent up feelings. She tells Weisbord:

Since all my mother did was write, I emulated her...But having watched mother, grandmother, great grand-mother, great-aunt suffer with a silence that did not protect them at all, I determined to write honestly. All the pain unexpressed and all the sad stories left untold made me write recklessly and in protest. (25)

Throughout her life she wanted to disturb the society. And the act of writing helped her in this rebellious endeavour. It is true that she wrote in both Malayalam and English. But she adopted English language to write poems to reach wider audience. She wrote her much debated autobiography *My Story* in both languages, but it was its English version which was published in 1976 caused uproars and attracted a significant number of readers. It changed her life style, too. Weisbord comments:

In the mid-1970s, the success of *My Story* makes Kamala Das a commodity and her relationship to her husband changes. He takes over her business affairs and handles her contracts and public appearances. She buys a new car, presents it to him for his birthday, and gives him all her earnings. (86)

On a personal level she noticed that the changes took place in her life and that was obviously due to her writing. However, it was not materialistic gain that lured her to continue writing in English; rather it became a part of her existence, too. She continued publishing poems, stories and moreover columns in several magazines and newspapers in English. Her ways of expressions, choice of words, phrases etc left a deep impact in the treatment of English language. These pieces ultimately proved influential in providing women a voice to express their protest against the male-dominated society. She used two names, i.e. "Kamala Das" and "Madhavikutty", for her English and Malayalam writings respectively. And it would not be wrong to state that "Kamala Das" prevailed over the other one. Her nomination for Nobel Prize in Literature along other literary personalities like Nadine Gordimer and Doris Lessing in 1984 supports this view. So, she appropriated English language to make it her poetic self. Thus, in an interview with P.P.Raveendran, while the interviewer wanted to know about the language in which she used to dream, he was confirmed that it must be her mother tongue as usual. But he was surprised to the response by Das, "I dream in English, I am afraid" (173). Nowadays, Indian Writing in English is an established platform around the world and Das can certainly be considered a major contributor of it.

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