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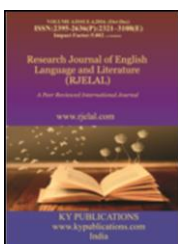


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EXPLORATION OF THE IDEA OF IDENTITY IN THE WORKS OF KAMALA DAS

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to trace the writer's exploration of the idea of identity through her journey of self-exploration and self-identification. She achieves this through the bitter experiences of her life as she explains ideas of love, alienation and the discrimination she faces on a regular basis. She successfully peels off and lays bare various identities of her self. These identities are a result of her constant search and questioning of the various bitter situations of her life which are demonstrated in her work marred by miseries, frustrations, loneliness.

Keywords : Identity, Self-exploration, Misery

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Since several centuries women have always been marginalized and suppressed by the patriarchal mindset of the society. Time and again one comes across various writers who have attempted to redefine the position of women in the hierarchical setup. Among these writers was the well-known woman who shook the very foundation of male chauvinism by her explicit attacks through the medium of pen and paper. This was none other than the famous Kamala Das. It is of significance to make note of the fact that she wrote at a time when firstly – India had yet not witnessed a woman who was blunt in conveying her thoughts and ideas which were not much spoken of in the public sphere and secondly, the world which had already witnessed the first wave of feminism was now passing through an even stronger Second Wave of Feminism. Kamala Das's work deals with ideas on upliftment of the female sex by constantly targeting the male ego and their constant discrimination towards the fairer sex. To put all of the aforesaid statements into perspective, the paper will discuss the writer in detail and establish how she

championed the cause of providing a new identity to the womenfolk.

Winner of the PEN International Award for poetry and Kerala Sahitya Award for her literary contribution, Kamala Das has emerged as a significant writer in the Indian literary circle during the post-independence period. Sunanda P. Chavan states her charismatic personality through the lines: "Kamala Das embodies the most significant stage of development of Indian Feminine poetic sensibility not yet reached by her contemporaries." To begin with, her work spans across several volumes of poetry, short stories, autobiography and several columns. She constantly tries to redefine the space of society by questioning the pitiable positions that have been granted to women. She asserts in her poem – "The Introduction"

"Dress in sarees, be girl

Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,

Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,

Belong, cried the categorizers"

Clearly, one notices the expectations the society has from her. She is supposed to 'fit in' always, by playing the domestic roles that are assigned to her. Be it of a

'wife', 'embroiderer', 'cook'. The above lines also powerfully demonstrate the reduction of women's role to private sphere. In this way, Kamala Das puts forward the idea of how a women's identity is merely established by belonging to certain conventional roles. Consequently, she even becomes dejected and shattered at various instances in her work. For she openly declares –“ my love is an empty gift, a gilded empty container, good for show, nothing else,” “Ah, why does love come to me like pain Again and again and again?” .

Similarly, the resonance of theme of love in her poem also demonstrates her exploration of the self as she longs for both carnal and spiritual love. Yet, unable to achieve it she shifts her identities from being an obedient one to the one who is rebellious and is even ready to move into the public arena to fulfill her needs of love.

“you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved.... I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to
Receive love, at least in small change?”

It can be observed that the writer is haunted by a sense of loneliness as she wants to be loved again. It is for this she readily moves into another uncommon domain-the public life where she interacts with other males to receive love. Her desperation to satisfy her needs can be gauged from her mention of the line – ‘Receive love, at least in small change.’ In fact, critic Devendra Kohli observes: “When Kamala Das speaks of love outside marriage, she is not really propagating adultery and infidelity, but merely, searching for a relationship which gives both love and security.”

This constant split of her personality and identity can be seen echoing throughout her works as various dichotomies come into working-reality and appearance, public and private life, inner and outer self, role as a woman and as a writer. She states this quest in her autobiography “One's real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one, who has decided to travel inwards, will realize that his route has no end”. Through her search of the real identity of a woman she brings into focus

the study of Krishna-Radha myth at various places. For instance in her poem ‘The Maggots’ which states:

“ At sunset, on the river bank, Krishna
Loved her for the last time and left...
That night in her husband's arms, Radha felt
So dead that he asked, What is wrong,
Do you mind my kisses, love? And she said,
No, not at all, but thought, What is
It to the corpse if the maggots nip?”

This poem becomes significant because it makes all that Kamala Das attempts to highlight universal by the mention of Radha-Krishna myth. Therefore, one sees it is not just a normal woman but all entities omnipresent which go through the sufferings and pain. Through her exploration of the idea of identity she declares a sense of chaos that has overcome not just a single individual but also all aspects as a whole. She portrays homogeneity in conveying to the readers the position of all womankind who are all in some way or the other marginalized. In fact, this marginalization is felt by women both within and without. She even resorts to the surreal -the bhaktism, where through Sarguna aspect she imagines herself to be much like Meera Bai. This becomes clear in the following lines of her poem “A Request”

“O Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
Nothing remains but you
You ...”

Thus, almost like Mira, she now seeks union with none but the divine-Krishna to overcome her agony. She often uses the myth of Krishna to convey her message.

In fact, it is because of these bold articulation of her thoughts that K.R. Srinivas Iyenger observes: “Kamala Das is a new phenomenon in Indo- Anglican poetry, a far poetic cry indeed from Toru Dutt or even Sarojini Naidu. Kamala Das's is fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive man-made world”

Throughout her work, the moments of her anguish and distress are powerfully demonstrated. In her poem “The Prisoner” this is vividly seen

“As the prisoner studies
His prison's geography

I study the trappings
Of your body dear love,
For I must some day find
An escape from its shore.”

Hence, as one notices in the lines it appears that the writer is a prisoner who seeks an escape from the prison house as she yearns for love. Therefore, she transgresses through various identities as she tries to bring an end to her misery. Her identities are many – a prisoner, Krishna's lover-Radha and even the bhakti saint Radha. She seems to have no regrets in being open about her affairs with strangers as she tries to fulfill her desires as discussed earlier. There is a sense of split of her personality and her identity as she tries to balance between both conventional woman who plays the role of a wife ready to work as per her husband wishes and a newly emerged Indian woman who revolts for her rights, is vocal about her demands and is aware. Infact Critic N. Dwivedi makes an important observation on the works of the writer: “It should, however, be remembered that Kamala Das wrote her poetry against a more conservative and tabooed society. ... She has, therefore, more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual liberty and identity. More often than not she concentrates on sexual love, and her woman-persona rises as though in a mood of revolt” It is also interesting to note that even in her real life Kamala Das blurred the lines of her identity not only on the basis of gender but also religion as she went on to change her religion. Her disillusionment of the ideas of love springs from her own life as visible in her autobiography- ‘My Story’. Throughout her work she lays open the workings of the patriarchal structure that tries to subordinate her. Thus, she becomes representative of an identity symbolic of womanhood as a whole who face discrimination in the hands of male chauvinism. She explicitly expresses in her autobiography -: “I was burden and a responsibility neither my parents nor my grandmother could put up with for long. Therefore with the blessing of all, our marriage was fixed”. Again highlighting, the status the women occupy in contemporary times and their continuous struggle to live a life of equality. Rama Rani Lal, confirms, “In

My Story she attempts to define her identity as a woman and to create a space within her and around her in order to assert the legitimacy of her dreams and fantasies and to express her hopes and frustrations.”

Infact, her exploration of identity makes her curious as she ultimately goes to the extent of questioning her father. She is blunt enough to ask - “Father, I ask you now without fear Did you want me Did you ever want a daughter Did I disappoint you much with my skin as dark as yours.” Similarly, another of her statements says- “What I am able to give is only what your wife is qualified to give. We are all alike, We women, in our wrappings of hairless skin.” Thereby, encircling her very identity with a question mark as she begins to become conscious and aware that the suppression she faces might be due to her various identities-gender, dark skin. Thus, Kamala Das is assertive and lays open the harsh realities of her times. It is of relevance to remember Coppelia Kahn here. Kahn strongly declares: “History has been a record of male experience, written by men from male perspectives. What has been deemed so according to a valuation of power and activity in public world... It is therefore imperative for historians of women to reconstruct the female experience and fill the blank pages and make the silence speak.” It is this very role that the writer- Kamala Das succeeds in playing through her collection of literary work and make the “silence speak”.

In summation, it is correct to state that the writer Kamala Das in her search of identity as visible by a close study of her various works is able to travel through a journey of self-discovery and self-revelation. For, it becomes amply clear that her identity is layered with multiple interpretations and various dimensions. Infact, her feminist consciousness succeeds in standing apart because of its explicit tone as she brings to the forefront openly her anguish, frustrations and trauma. It is for this, Critic C.R. Nambiar, shares his observation about the relevance of Kamala Das poetry, “She becomes a feminist writer by making her women conscious and providing them wings to rise and flutter... The essence of her poems is struggle about her own self and... is a cry for freedom”

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