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POSTMODERN THEORIES IN THE SELECT WORKS OF KAMALA DAS & MAYA ANGELOU

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ABSTRACT

The world so caught up in technology and development, paved a way for viewing literature relating them to theories that evolved in the course of time. Literary works of contemporaries like Kamala Das, a prolific figure in Indian Writing & Maya Angelou, a literary legend from Africa whose works were considered very sensational blended perfectly well with the need of the hour. Kamala Das & Maya Angelou are writers who come from different culture; ethnicity and background are post modern in their thoughts and expressions. This essay is an attempt to interpret the Post modern theories that their select works comprise of & to indubitably justify that they are traditional and equally postmodern as well, breaking the prejudice that works that incorporate traditional ideas cannot become Post modern.

Keywords: Indian writer, Post modern, Feminism, Eco- Feminism, Diaspora, Coming of Age and Post- Colonial

Introduction

Postmodern techniques are those that evolved in the later 20th century. When critics delved deep into the writings of postmodern writers they found some sort of uniqueness that was inimitable when compared to the writers of the same period. This resulted in the evolution of postmodern techniques. Irony along with black humour was one of the major techniques that became very famous. Tracing the roots of these techniques takes us way back to the dramatists of the 19th and the 20th century.

Discussion

Feminism gained its attention with writers like Kamala Das and Maya Angelou. As Wikipedia states "Feminism is a range of movements and ideologies that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights for women. This

includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. A feminist advocates or supports the rights and equality of women". These two writers can be related to feminism because Third World Feminism or Indigenous Feminism is closely related to postcolonial feminism. There was a vehement argument in which the postcolonial feminists stated that colonial feminism and western feminization marginalized postcolonial women but did not turn them passive or voiceless. Maya Angelou is an apt example to this above stated lines because colonization only motivated her to voice her opinions against them but did not make her submissive. The ideas of third wave feminism correspond to the African feminism, motherism and Africana womanism etc.

Kamala Das is also closely related to postcolonial feminism, which she clearly expresses

in her autobiography *My Story*. The autobiographies of these prolific writers are written in a peculiar way following a deliberate form, where the aim of the writers is to reveal them from all perspective. Self-Portrayal or Self-Portraiture has fascinated man for centuries. Like all the other types, autobiography as a genre has gone through its own face of transformation over the years. A genre that gives free will to the writer to be both subjective and objective at the same time is autobiography. Autobiography is a self-conscious art which requires dexterity of introspection too. Looking at *My Story* from a feminist perspective shows that it is an attempt of an Indian woman Autobiographer who treads the untrodden challenge of exploring and sharing one's experiences for her bodily encounters which serves as a foundation of her sociological, psychological and even spiritual development. Through this Kamala Das expresses her feminist view on how a male counterpart depends wholly on her only for gratifying his thirst for physical pleasures. Though people consider this issue to be a taboo and that should not be discussed in public, Das' feministic instinct gave her the courage to pen them down and make it known to the readers. Kamala Das and Maya Angelou are known to the world as confessional poets. Most of these confessions are based in the aggressive, assertive approach of sex by men on their immature bodies. Kamala Das expresses her utter disgust when she feels that in an intimate relationship between man and woman, in which both of them are equal in giving and receiving pleasure from each other, women are looked upon as instruments of joy. Her abhorrence increases when men easily throw the blame on a woman labeling her cold or frigid when they fail to satisfy men by giving them physical pleasures.

Maya expresses the **coming of age** in this autobiography very beautifully by presenting her feelings in the autobiography.

I wandered into a retreat by accident. Signs with arrows around the barbecue pit pointed MEN, WOMEN, CHILDREN toward fading lanes, grown over since last year. Feeling ages old and very wise at ten, I couldn't allow myself to be found by small

children squatting behind a tree. Neither did I have the nerve to follow the arrow pointing the way for WOMEN. If any grownup had caught me there it was possible that she'd think I was being "womanish" and would report me to Momma, and I knew what I could expect from her. (Angelou 139)

This expression of coming of age she contrasts with the innocence of a child that was in her in the very next chapter where she discloses her elder brother Bailey's sexual relationship with girls.

One by one, he (Bailey) took the impressed, the curious, the adventurous into the gray shadows, after explaining that they were going to play Momma and Poppa. I (Maya) was assigned the role of Baby and lookout. (Angelou 147)

Just like Maya Angelou, Kamala Das has also had womanly feeling when she was very young. As she expresses her longing for love that is as intellectual as it is emotional but gets utterly disappointed as she receives love from her husband only in the corporeal sense. She presents to the reader of what her expectations were as a newly married young girl and what she received. "I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words." (Das 80)

Her expectations for acts of love were thwarted and she felt so disheartened as she faces the brutality of sex.

"I took off my sari which was of heavy gold tissue and sat on the bed. Then without warning he fell on me, surprising me by the extreme brutality of attack." (Das 84) Kamala Das shows her repulse by calling it a 'rape'.

Kamala Das seems to exhibit the typical womanly characters and a daughter who respects her family. "My father was an autocrat and if he went wrong in his decisions he did not want ever to hear about it. I was mature enough then to want to protect this faith in himself" (Das 86). This shows how woman in the name of tradition and culture were taught to be submissive and be carpets under the legs of their male counterparts. This act of Kamala Das is completely in loggerheads to her feminist views as the male dominated society

believes that women are subordinate to men because she was made out of man. Kamala through her life's story brings out Indian woman whose has been a symbol of Silent- suffering and portrayed as upholders of culture as an often repeated stereotype of woman in most of the Indian Fiction.

Another area that relates closely itself to the former discussed topic feminism is Ecofeminism. As Wikipedia defines it,

'Ecofeminism is a philosophical and political theory and movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones, regarding both as resulting from male domination of society.'

Sensitivity towards nature is undoubtedly a feminine attribute which is very essential and a matter of immense importance on this earth. The modern generation that took a leap from 'femininity' as the mode of living to androcentrism has led to the devaluing of nature.

From ancient days till date, man tries to tame nature/ woman in every possible way such as physically, mentally or spiritually.

On sedatives

I am more lovable

Says my husband

My speech becomes a mist-laden terrain

.....He would if he could

Sing lullabies to his wife's sleeping soul.

(Das 187)

To control the natural energy of his wife, the Husband puts her in Sedatives. The intention behind singing lullabies to her is throwing pretence of love and thereby trying to dominate, to curb, to strangle the free spirit of the 'Earth', the 'woman'.

The mood shifts or her emotional outlets are expressed in *My Story* through poems and all that happens around her she relates it to some action of nature. She observes men singing songs in praise during the Ganesh festival and this is how she expresses what she observes,

"The men drink hard; raise their voices in his praise. The song rises like a tired snake that has finally reconciled itself to its destiny which is to uncurl out of the snake charmer's basket and sway."(Das 208)

She beautifully weaves elements of nature to express her temperament. She compares herself to

those components of nature and reveals to the readers that the umbilical cord between Mother Nature and women can never be severed. She also brings in elements of Pathetic fallacy while she expresses her circumstances.

"I had desired to possess the sense, the courage to pick myself an average identity, to age through years of earthy din gently like cut flower until it was time to be removed, but I had wandered, fog-eyed, seeking another, to be mine, my own to love or destroy and to share with me the dim-lit gloom where I moved like a fawn."(Das 204)

She mentions the word "average identity" in the above lines which gives us the hint that the treatment of her husband was not at par with the treatment of any other normal human being for that matter. Not just her emotional part that she tries to explain through nature but even the process of ageing to that of the season.

"The Beginning of Autumn:

She floats in her autumn,

Yellowed like a leaf

And free."(Das 171)

Kamala Das' overflow of emotions and her intimacy with nature is expressed as she even describes her physical desires comparing them to a lotus in a pond.

"If my desires were lotuses in a pond, closing their petals at dusk and opening out at dawn once upon a time, they were now totally dead, rotted and dissolved, and for them there was no more to be a re-sprouting. The pond had cleared itself of all growth. It was placid.(Das 204)

Maya Angelou in her autobiography finds a voice to express the thoughts of a black girl who is caught in the diasporic world. Her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged bird Sings* which was published in 1970 is an exploration of representations of black women in diaspora. Thus her autobiography serves two important purposes. Firstly, this work is an expression of an oppressed black girl called Maya Angelou and secondly, Maya here is a representative character of a black girl's life & her struggles in a colonized, patriarchal and dominant male society.

Modern studies identify this novel as a work of postcolonial fiction. Being a member of a marginalized community, many found it difficult to place themselves in the position of the central character. Through this autobiography Maya Angelou breaks away from the tradition and presents blackness from the inside out.

In the article, "Ain't I a woman": Exploring Femitinities in Diaspora in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* "the author comments on the novel thus

The novel which falls under the rubric of postcolonial fiction reveals the protagonist's experiences of being —caged by various circles of marginality. Her representations are also significant because they point out how the women of color acquire the subject and object positions reciprocally. When looked at in this way, Angelou's representations can be seen in contrast with the fixed colonial representations where oppressed is the only identity devised for the women of color.

Maya tries to explore the areas of race, gender and class which are used as tools to marginalization. The novel affirms the belief that colour of the skin also matters. Maya being doubly marginalized (as a black and as a girl) fights for what has been curbed from her. Her freedom to express, her freedom to be like others and lead a normal life is not only her expectations but they are what every black men and women look up to. The coloured people who especially lived in Arkansas feared racial exploitation just because it consisted of citizens who are economically disadvantaged.

In the article, "Ain't I a Woman": Exploring femitinities in Diaspora in Angelou's 'I Know Why the Caged bird Sings' says thus "we need to un-learn the idiom of the colonizer to relearn the gender norms."

"In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black Children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like. Other than that they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the

worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed."(Angelou 25)

She was more intensely connected to Arkansas than she ever thought of and this revelation dawns on her when she is raped in California and Arkansas is where she recovers from her emotional and psychological trauma. Mrs. Henderson, whom the kids fondly address as "Momma" in the novel is a symbol of endurance and hope who believes that her grandchildren could be empowered if they keep themselves possibly away from the influence of the white folks and also by following sincerely the austere values of the African American family system. Maya is boosted with confidence of her colour and is healed of the depression and frustration she undergoes because of her physical abuse and fights it back with the help of her uncle.

"He told me often, "Ritie, don't worry 'cause you ain't pretty. Plenty pretty women I see digging ditches or worse. You smart. I swear to God, I rather you have a good mind than a cute behind."(Angelou 67)

Maya being the part of the racially oppressed society is forced or gifted a view of her life through the eyes of those who control her world. There is a great influence of the white folks on her that she feels that her own community is inadequate. Angelou as an autobiographer recognizes the similarities and differences between the prevailing, segregating culture and the underlying ethnicity. Angelou cannot separate herself entirely from the black community. This motivates her to search for a way to portray her racial and ethnic roots along with her isolated self (her dream of enjoying the life as a white).

Angelou's love for Shakespeare and that of literature is way that she finds to look past her oppressed experience of her family and that of other black families by creating a 'dual consciousness'. She identifies herself with the writing and the characters in literature. This gives her an identity that she feels is an identity in par with the identity of the white folks in Stamps. This dual consciousness frees herself from the limited collective identity of the black community. On the contrary, her recitation of the

poems of Shakespeare gives voice to her own pain as a victim of the white community that surrounds her.

Conclusion

Life narratives perform the role of projecting women's triumphs and inducing guilt in the minds of the oppressors proving that they were wrong in their assumptions or beliefs about a woman's capabilities. These novels explore the historical devaluation of women. These women have violated the parameters of a canonical autobiography and have given an alternative account of history on the basis of gender, caste and religion that had immense impact on women.

Thus Maya Angelou and Kamala Das fit in perfectly well to the postmodern era. Feminism, Ecofeminism and Diaspora are few prevalent or common theories or ideas expressed in postmodern literature. We find these elements intricately woven in the writings of these two female literary legends. This affirms the justification that the writers in spite of the fetters called a tradition and culture; race and gender have equipped themselves to be equally competent to other male writers of the period.

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