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**EXPLORING FEMINISM IN INDIA: KAMALA DAS AS A TRAILBLAZING
CONFESSIONAL POETESS**

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Abstract:

*This paper investigates feminism in India through the perspective of Kamala Das, one of the first Indian female poets and author to vocalize her thoughts with profound impact. Das challenged the male-dominated literary landscape and rejected societal expectations placed on women writers. Her confessional poetry, exemplified in works such as *An Introduction*, *Summer in Calcutta*, and *Forest Fire*, played a pivotal role during India's freedom struggle and post-independence. Das's writing style, characterized by directness and honesty, made her work accessible to a wider audience, fostering an intercultural relationship between feminism and Indian literature. This research examines three of her poems, focusing on themes of societal constraints, relationships, and gender identity. It also explores the influence of the English language on Indian writing post-independence, providing authors and poets with a global platform. By analyzing Das's contributions, this paper highlights her significance as a feminist author and her impact on feminist discourse in India.*

Keywords: *Feminism, Confessional Poet, Societal Constraints, Gender Identity, Patriarchy, etc.*

Kamala Das was the first Indian female poet and author to voice her thoughts through words in the most striking way. She illustrated the thoughts of Indian women in the world full of male voices. She is profoundly known as the first feminist of English Indian writings. Her works such as *An Introduction*, *Summer in Calcutta*, and *Forest Fire* aptly describe her title as the 'Confessional Poet' (Atlas). Such poetry was a part of freedom struggle in India while conveying thoughts of women during the struggle and after India gained freedom.

Being a part of freedom struggle for the country, Das was constantly active in rooting for female rights during and after the colonial period in India. She was voraciously writing in her own style which was too direct for her contemporary authors. Female authors were, and are still, expected to highlight the sensuality in their works which is expected from them in real life, which is why I believe that there is minors cope for creativity and honesty in their work; however Das boldly and openly discards this idea of following rules set by the patriarchal society. She examines her feelings and makes confessions in her poetry to share her grief which is why she is also regarded as a 'Confessional Poet' (Atlas). By examining her confessional works, I argue that she was not only one of the first feminist authors of India but was also the harbinger of feminist ideas in literary scholarships. Her unique style makes her writings more grasping and engaging for common mass, thus making it more accessible. It is crucial to analyze her confessional style because it traces a scholarly fight against the patriarchal society which does not allow women to step out of the household boundaries. These similarities are keys to assess the inter-cultural relation between the philosophical ideas about feminism across India. By inter-cultural relation, I refer to the impact of English language on Indian writing culture post-independence, providing a global platform to Indian authors and poets to expand their audience base. India, who has just gained independence, was facing issues in the social



structure. The question is what makes such restraints prominent among the writings of Das that she is referred to as a confessional poet. To examine these patterns, I analyze three of her poems; An Introduction, The Old Playhouse, and The Freaks which deal with her most grappling thoughts on society, her husband, and herself, respectively, compelling her to embrace her identity as a woman in a patriarchal society. In addition, I trace her lesbianism to identify the importance of gender in India as it indirectly affects the literary scholarships in English Indian writing in modern era too.

Feminism in India:

Feminist ideology in India has been represented since Vedic times by different women in their vernacular languages without categorizing them as feminist writing, these writings focused on evocation of female opinion and were widely read. Such an indication justifies that “feminist literature in India has its roots in the Indian context itself and does not follow its western counterpart blindly for their quest for identity but emerges from the Indian ethos itself” further strengthening the voice in Indian literature” (Nabi, 12). Das is aware of her audience and plays with their reaction by providing them with direct verses from her life pointing towards shattering of the conservative structure. Writings of female authors from the era still survive but they are politely written whereas Das writes in an upfront manner which is new to English Indian poetry.

Along with playing with the reactions of the audience, she also engages with her own experiences translating it into a relatable style. Her scholarships provide a sense of comfort to female readers making them feel that their voice is being heard and they are not alone in their battle. This connection paved way for future female writers such as Maitrayee Chaudhuri and Leela Kasturi, who wrote their piece by keeping Das in mind.

Although Das was writing in the colonial era, her works were deeply rooted in her firsthand experiences, making her writings confessional. She was, and remains, the face of feminism in India which began in mid-nineteenth century following the second wave of feminism in the West. She is aptly regarded as the harbinger of literary feminism in India as she wrote profusely in an era when there were no resources available for women to escalate their dreams.

Use of Indian English:

The use of English language post decolonization in India became a necessity to embed homogeneity across the country. English as a language has played a pivotal role in shaping English literature in the Indian sub-continent.

Das is a voracious writer when it comes to expressing her firsthand experiences alongside being aware of her audience and unintentionally uses Indian English, English used with local understanding. The use of the language shifts when she is evoking her readers and is expressing herself. In “An Introduction,” she revokes the critics by saying that “The language I speak Becomes mine,” this indulges with the notion of merging culture with language. (Das, 10,11) This robust and open challenge to her critiques symbolizes her direct approach to her poetry differentiating her works from her contemporaries.

Nissim Ezekiel is one of her prominent contemporary writers who uses Indian English. Their works are often compared as both of them dwell on the notion of using socio-cultural impact on language to establish a relatedness with the readers. Rajeev S. Patke in “Poetry Since Independence” talks about their writings being affected by a socio-cultural dynamic furthering on an illustration of Das’s poems highlighting a confessional style in the writing. Ezekiel’s “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa” uses an intentional language change whereas Das’s “An Introduction” focuses on a fundamental subject while the language flows in naturally (S. Patke, 243-275). The line in Ezekiel’s poem “Miss Pushpa is coming from a very high family” shares the common use of English language



by locals adapting it to a vernacular understanding of the context (Ezekiel). Ezekiel deliberately uses the line to mock Indians and their use of English grammar. In one of her interviews, Das also points out and says that “The Westerners were just waiting for an opportunity to ridicule us...He was catering to the already present stereotypes and popular ideas about India and Indian English in the Western media” (“An Interview With Kamala Das.” *Kavya Bharati: A Review of Indian Poetry: Number 20; Kavya Bharati, A Review of Indian Poetry, Tamilnadu. 2008. ProQuest*). I agree with her on the note that it is crucial to analyze the importance of a language as it can quickly turn into a stereotypical reception of a work which hinders the growth of creativity in future indigenous works.

Das is keen on learning diverse ways to eradicate this stigma of stereotypes, particularly about women. Her poem “An Introduction” concludes with her asserting herself as “I,” which falls in perfect alignment with Ezekiel’s lines “Pushpa Miss is never saying no. Whatever I or anybody is asking she is always saying yes,” where it denotes that to be a good woman one should abide by the rules and be empathetic towards everyone. (Ezekiel) He goes on to say that this is the reason she is successful in her life ignoring her hard work and diligence. When Das said, “it is I who make love, And then, feel shame,” I resonated with her on the force that everything is done by her, yet the credit goes to her husband for making love showing his bravado to all his peers. (Das) This completely disregards her contribution leaving her insignificant, similarly when Ezekiel talks about Miss Pushpa’s modesty as the sole factor for her success, he too is disregarding the efforts put in by a woman to achieve her goal.

The difference in the perspective by two different poets makes a captivating claim on the public image of a woman and her struggle. This stark contrast indicates why Das is inclined towards fighting for recognition of women and how her personal constraints relate to the use of Indian English in order to reach a larger audience asking for a shift in the perception of common mass as it is the only way English as a language can impact the outlook of Indian society.

Das as a Confessional Poetess:

Das’s assertion of the letter “I” was not only representative of the female identity but also illustrated the existence of the nation as an independent entity (Sinha, 51). Her poems became a medium to voice the caged voice of females in Indian society who were experiencing similar emotions, as well as fighting against the rigid patriarchal society. Her poetry is regarded as confessional which, I believe, refers to voicing the expression of suppressed voice of women in India. The era when she wrote is crucial to analyze her works which marks an era of less opportunity for women to grow outside their household boundaries, especially the middle-class women. As Nabi puts it, “During the freedom struggle, (1915-1947) an independent women’s movement paved the way for equal opportunities in education and status of women in Indian culture, especially, the middle-class women were in a turmoil between a choice to have only one either family or career, which created an opportunity for Das to engrave her words in ink to pass on the message to lift the voices of women in the Indian society” (Nabi, 7).

Being a part of the revolution in Indian society at a time when women rights or feminism was not a well-known phenomenon in literature, Das’s writings became the precursor of a feminist voice in the writings of her fellow and future female writers. “An Introduction” is one of her famous poems which is often corresponded with confessional yet an erotic feminist tone. The line “Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in.” denotes that women were expected to follow everything the male of the of the house commands. Alongside that they had to maintain a peaceful environment which meant restrictions based on their physical appearance. Das aptly portrays it in the line “I wore a shirt and my Brother’s trousers,” which represents the ‘dress code’ to be followed by women (Das, 32-33). Women were not allowed to wear any piece of clothing which may denote a male aura in them: “shirt” and “trousers” are specifically chosen as garment pieces to denote restrictions on even the most basic form



of freedom a woman can possess. This follows into her next line where she talks about mingling with the societal rule. She is continuously instructed to “fit in” while ‘respecting’ the prejudices that confound freedom of women. The idea of “fitting in” has a wide spectrum which suspects the boundaries of the definition of the roles a woman must fulfill to maintain her ‘respectful’ status in the orthodox Indian society.

This follows into her question about the definition of “womanliness” by arguing the number of limitations that are being imposed on women. In present scenario, “shirt” and “trouser” are one of the necessary garments for work which rebukes the idea and cause of imposing such controlling measures on women clearly indicating the excessiveness of male chauvinism. The phenomenon of chauvinism is not new however; it seems to self-assume the authority to guide systematic management of the surroundings making it a necessity for feminist voices to arise in the first place. The choice of clothing is a basic example to show how she is being controlled by this managing behavior of male chauvinism present in Indian society in addition to other limitations. Rakhi Vyas’s quote, “She is India’s answer to the American coterie of confessional poets as she limns a brutally honest portrait of her deeply felt angst, pain, and bewilderment against the male-dominated superstructure in our society, in the most striking of confessional tones.” aptly justifies her robust writing style when compared to American feminist authors who were in full bloom of their writing era (Vyas, 104-05). Her failed marriage acts as a narrative for every piece where she paints her sorrow, grief, and helplessness in her relationship. She is concerned about her lustful longing for a carnal meeting with her husband whom turns into a more elaborate issue of love and lust.

An Introduction is evoking the sentiments of not only the females but also the progressive males who are willing to adapt to the changing scenarios. Such an occurrence was quite limited and even today the urban spaces in India follow this trend. These incidents vouch for equal rights for women in the works of Das making her stand out among her peers. Thus, the aggressiveness in her writing became associated with confession, making her one of the best confessional poets of the era.

Freedom of Expression in Das’s *The Old Playhouse*:

Das’s poem *The Old Playhouse* revolves around the theme of lovemaking. She expresses her thoughts from her intimate scenes with her husbands which have now turned into a mere lustful moment and is guided by her husband’s “ego” (poemanalysis.com). The lines “Cowering Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and Became a dwarf.” depicts the overpowering nature of her husband over her emotions, thoughts as well as actions during the intercourse (Das, 14-16). Such a situation is not only true of the intercourse but also illustrates her helplessness towards her actions in a daily life routine. She too has desires but cannot voice them as she must aid to her husband’s “ego” and pleasure, satisfying his lust.

She compares herself to a “dwarf” because she is succumbing to demands of her man. She must make her physical as well as mental self, smaller to be a ‘good wife.’ The term “dwarf” symbolizes her physical gesture however, I perceive it as a diminishing action of her mental capability by the closest male in her life. From a modern lens, her husband not asking for her permission before their sexual intercourse is equivalent to rape. By rape, I refer to physical as well as mental abuse: she explains her physical abuse in multiple ways in the poem however, the mental abuse is hidden behind her submission to this male.

As Nabi writes, “Western feminist theories though claiming to provide a multicultural or global perspective on women’s issues can’t be applied to other cultures as these ideas are firmly emblematic of western cultural paradigms and very often the needs and problems of women in different cultures differ” discussing the lack of Western feminism to accommodate diversity and yet claiming to be the best form of literary feminism which provides one umbrella for every feminist



across the globe. (Nabi, 5-6) Even Adichie talks about this lack in the writings of Western feminists in her talk and says that she was called “too American” because she had liberal ideas (YouTube.com). Such claims point towards a progressive movement in literary feminism wherein scholarships from distinct parts of the world were voicing against all pervasiveness of the Western feminists and their ideologies. This shift indicates the concept of non-inclusiveness in the field leaving behind other conceptions.

Gender and Lesbianism:

During the 1960s, lesbianism began to emerge as a different field of thought in literature. The discipline emerged because it was not really being represented in the existing disciplines. Friedan’s critique on lavender menace is a good example to situate the non-inclusivity experienced by the lesbian community in America.

After facing some backlash on political front, she began a campaign to include lesbian women in her NOW movement, a strategy used by the liberal feminists (Poirot). Her fear that radical and lesbian feminists might disrupt their liberal feminism rooted from the very fact of exclusion and turning this identity crisis into a political movement to receive support from other women who consider themselves as someone belonging to the same community but as a homosexual gave a hint to the upcoming transformation in the female community itself.

A similar presence is seen in the works of Das where she is addressed as a member of queer community. Her autobiography, *My Story*, narrates her life story depicting pieces of her life that represent a lesbian behavior from her end. Her failed married life is a crucial aspect in the book, which illustrates her experience of love in different areas of life. Her idea of a relationship is naïve and pious, which does not involve any form of sexual encounter with her husband. She wanted “him to take her in his arms” and “stroke” her “face, hair and whisper loving words” to her, regardless of her imagination, she was surprised with sex (George). She is never aroused by her emotions for her husband which indicates that their relationship is not only unsuccessful but is solely run on their physical needs.

A part of her still longs for a relationship with her friend who lives near her parents’ house, but she is now a married woman who has responsibilities to oversee. There is no evidence of a same sex relationship between them but their manner of talk and their longing for each other shows their Platonic love for each other. Their reunion after Das’s marriage denotes their permanent separation where the friend disagrees to take her back home. It seems as if they are trying to evade their feelings but are still linked with each other by their past. This memory holds her precious notion of how love should unfold and how love should be treated in a relationship. The long conversations, warmth and the heartfelt affinity in their relationship was missing in her marital life which made her long for same sex love but was never successful.

Another poem of Das that deals with the theme of sex and gender is *The Doubt*. The poem revolves around the theme of death and the label of gender to a corpse. The lines “Does it Not mean that we believe that only the souls have sex, and that Sex is invisible!” aptly questions the role of gender in love (Das, 3-6). These lines bring into question the label of heterosexual and homosexual relationships and their importance in defining a person’s life based on a heterosexual biased society. Das also questions her own identity as she moves further in the poem juxtaposing her beliefs about love that she has formed to regulate her thoughts in order to fit in the world of heterogeneous society (George, 117). She is in a constant flux between finding her identity and relationship between gender, love, and death where she discovers that she desires female energy in a male body that is able to understand her compassion, just like she expects her son to be when he grows up. However, she fails to receive this spiritual love from her husband. (Das, *My Story*)



In one of her interviews, she talks about her same sex relationship desire where she states that “I do not think I’m lesbian. I tried to find out. I experiment with everything. I tried to find out if I were a lesbian, if I could respond to a woman. I failed. I must speak the truth.” (George, 740) This statement clarifies the doubt of a homosexual relationship in her life; however, her book is often confused with this idea as there is neither justification of her actions in the book nor is there any development of feelings for husband from her end. She completely dislikes the idea of watching her husband in that state but cannot help with her own desires too. This constant struggle between wanting love and wanting attention leads to the road of no fulfillment of either, leaving her void of love.

Contrasting Theme of Love and Lust:

Das’s works are mostly surrounded by the theme of love, sex, and lust. Her poetry *An Introduction* is the most popular and widely read work from her collection *Summer in Calcutta*. She is constantly struggling between attaining carnal love and spiritual love from her husband but is sadly always met with carnal desire. This leaves her hopeless for love in her life which, I believe, is her reason to turn to her pen to quench this longing for spirituality in love.

Since her idea of love is in contrast with her husband’s notion of love, she tries to make her husband understand but is ‘gifted’ with a baby boy. She is bewildered by her husband’s reaction towards her and their child as he is annoyed by the constant noise made by the little one. (George) This reflects her miserable plight where she is left completely helpless with her novel idea of love.

The repetition of lust and carnal love describes the situation as well as the positioning of women in society reflecting a diasporic convention. Her writings seem timeless as this situation has yet to be eradicated from society as a whole. I cannot say for sure when these imbalances of authority in marriage will completely vanish, but I believe that writings of authors such as Kamala Das bring an awareness in the mass. Her writings are evidence of a continued battle by one gender against another which sees no end to this struggle. She has the resources as well as the courage to confide in her pen to share her experiences yet there are women who have no access to these scholarships and are living in the same loop as Das, even today.

Her poem *The Freaks* talks about the nature of her unrequited love in her marital life. She discusses how her husband’s appearance disgusts her, but she too is prone to her “desires,” thus gives in to his demands (Das, 9). The first four lines of the poem describe the appearance as well as the approach of her husband which lacks a look of appearance towards her. Initially, she is not seen in the imagery, but her opinion is clearly depicted in a subtle tone of her writing. Although she is invisible until the end where she describes herself as a “freak,” her aversion and helplessness is noticeable in the description of this “man” who is ignorant of her feelings. To her, feelings and spiritual love are more important than a lustful union. I too believe in the idea of spiritual love over carnal and that emotional needs be met before proceeding towards a physical relationship. Her writings are truly evoking such ideas strengthening these prominent thoughts in female minds.

Coitus without consent in Marriage:

Women are usually categorized as powerless, and meek however I disagree with this belief as it is the pre-contextualized vision of women that still plays a significant role in defining them even today. Das talks about the usual categorization under male violence used to constrain women in order to define masculine superiority. It is mostly evident in marital life which Das talks about in abundance and focuses on her personal experience to follow this categorization and disagrees with it. In “An Introduction,” she informs the reader that when she was fantasizing about love from a man other than her father and brother. When she said, “he drew a youth of sixteen into the Bedroom and closed the door.” it resonated with Mohanty’s quote “Physical violence against women is thus conducted "with



an astonishing consensus among men in the world" (Mohanty, 339). Physical violence on women has a history to dive into however, what Das focuses on are the modern concept of rape in marriage. People are now becoming aware of the fact that it is possible for a person to be physically molested in a marriage. Women's fertility is depicted as a means to reproduce in the initial stage of the marriage eradicating the fact about her health and well-being necessary for the child's birth. Sex in marriage is considered incontrovertible which is often misused by male partners to satisfy their lust and physical desires. Das's poem "An Introduction" is an apt depiction of this instance.

I agree with Das on the note that "I am the beloved and the betrayed" because when a woman who undergoes sex, she becomes the limelight of society. She will be questioned, and often times men's infertility is neglected. Such incidents are a common occurrence where the woman suffers more than the man because she is confined to the household boundary. Society has a huge role to play in such occurrences as it is because of the so-called societal pressure although no one is sure about the origin of the rules for guiding women that exist in the society, even today. Thus, I question the authority of a partner in coitus because it is an equal right of each partner to provide consent especially when external factors such as opinion of society are integrated to how things should run between the couple.

Conclusion

To conclude, I agree with Das that there is no superiority in a relationship. However, due to societal factors in play it becomes clear that it is difficult to negotiate terms in a marital relationship. Das's *An Introduction* gracefully deals with complex idea on marriage, coitus, and consent making it a perfect read from a feminist lens. She also grapples with the notion of using writing as a way to escape reality. It is interesting to note that although her poems are personal, her voice is so powerful that it reaches all women, who can read, and creates a chain effect creating awareness about women rights. Her poems are indeed impactful however it is important to keep in mind that she is just one woman expressing herself. There are many voices which go unheard, thus as readers, it is vital for us to keep our ears open and let these voices be listened to.

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