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Kamala Das in Search of her Grandmother's Land: An Eco-Feminist Study of Kamala Das's Poetry

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Abstract

Eminent Indian woman writer Kamala Das's poetic oeuvre has its own rhetoric of communication with nature which when construed from an ecofeminist point of view reveals an interesting aspect of her poetry. Her imageries taken from the world of nature follow a distinct pattern of its own. Though her poems are not explicitly eloquent of ecological issues but when you compare her description of the degradation of nature and exploitation of woman in city life and the healthy cohabitation of nature and women in matriarchal village of her grandmother in Malabar poems, it brings home the conspicuous ecofeminist concern in her poem.

Key Words: Kamala Das, Ecofeminist, Ecological Issues, Malabar Poems

"She's all states and all princes I
Nothing else is"

John Donne in the above stated lines from 'The Sun Rising' inadvertently but aptly has expressed the inseparable predicament of nature and woman in a patriarchal society where man is self-proclaimed owner, protector and exploiter of the two. 'Happy' conclusion of the fairy tales also often ends with the prince winning the kingdom (nature) and the princess from their former owner and protector. The other side of the story is never told to us and the perspective of the kingdom (nature) and the princess is kept in silence forever. There is indeed little doubt that domination and exploitation of women and environment are interconnected, though the naturalness of their relationship can be debated. Ecofeminism as a theory discusses this reciprocity of nature and woman which forms a binary opposition to patriarchy. Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary term connecting Ecocriticism with Feminism. In the essay, "Is female to Male, as nature is to Culture?" Sherry B. Orton has bridged the

subordination of women with the subordination of nature:

"Women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture."

With the passage of time Ecofeminism has developed various branches, out of which radical and cultural Ecofeminism attributed to their contradictory stance regarding the relationship of nature and woman. Radical Ecofeminism disparages the equation of the two and presumes the liberation of woman is possible only by disassociating woman from nature. They basically have tried to deconstruct the patriarchal notion of women and nature as a primitive force of chaos and irrationality whereas cultural Ecofeminism encourages the identification of woman with nature as a strengthening force with its natural commitment to both environment and holistic organic process that competes life.

Contextualisation of Ecofeminism in India is all the more conspicuous as it gets punctuated with India's long mythic,

religious and cultural history of associating woman with Nature. We can find the affiliation between woman and nature in its conception of universal creative process as the result of the unification of Purusha (the universal cosmic man) and Prakriti (the mother nature). This theory of creation closely follows the theory of evolution / (genealogy of life) as enumerated in Greek Mythology where, Gaia is the mother nature who unifies with Uranus the sky god, who is quite similar to the cosmic male. In both the cases static passivity of earth or in the whole nature has been gendered as female. This theory can be considered as the earliest perpetrator of the fundamental binary opposition between :

Purush	Prakriti
Cosmic Male	Earthly Mother Nature
Soul	Body
Order	Wildness/chaos
Active	Passive
Rational	Emotional

Ecofeminism tries to explore the inherent relationship between the two and how both the movements can be conjoined to be helpful for each other.

This paper is an attempt to focus on the poetic cult of Kamala Das, one of the most eminent poets in the Indo-Anglican poetic realm from the perspective of Ecofeminism. Kamala Das as a poet needs no introduction. She has earned worldwide fame for her candid expression in her confessional poetry. To consider kamala Das as an ecofeminist is as problematic as to simplify her position as a feminist. Her love poetry swings to-and-fro from being rebellious to submissive. In one point she rebels against the patriarchal diktats to fit in the societal roles assigned to woman in 'An Introduction':

"I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short
ignored
My womanliness."

While in the next moment her feminist stance seems to lose ground in such expressions as found in the poem 'Relationship':

"My body's wisdom tells and tells again
That I shall find my rest, my sleep, my
peace
And even death nowhere else but here in
My betrayer's arms "
Her response to nature is equally whimsical.

Kamala Das was not conscious practitioner of Ecofeminism as much of her works were composed long before the establishment of Ecofeminism as a theory. Thus we have to depend solely on her use of imageries and symbols taken from nature and their implicit connection with the theme discussed. 'Sun' is a recurrent symbol in the poems which are marked by her dissonant sense of disappointment and deprivation in love. Description of her lover devoid of love, affection and comfort has often been represented with the imagery of 'sun'. Sun is represented to reflect the male attributes in the poem 'In Love':

"O what does the burning mouth
Of sun, burning in today's
Sky, reminds me... oh, yes, his
Mouth and... his limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
Out for me."

And in the poem 'The Freaks':

"He talks, turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, dark
Cavern"

Reiterate use of burning imagery coupled with the metaphor of 'sun' and 'pyre' makes explicit the rudeness, she was exposed to in the society. Her barren feminine self and aridity of her love life can be compared with the scorched earth in the present day global warming which has brought the possibility of the pure state of nature to an end. Her experience of atrocity in love is a termination of her pure peaceful days spent in her grandmother's cosy world.

Sun is an important metaphor to understand Kamala Das's love poems. In Hindu mythology another name for 'surya' or sun is 'mitra' (friend) for its life nourishing purpose. The mitra form of surya is important to understand the matrimonial relationship based on not only the mutual trust of a friend but also for the life nourishing elements. Husband and wife become life nourishing elements for each other through the sacred bond of matrimony.

Failure of Kamala Das's desire of achieving those life nourishing elements from her 'mitra' lends equal distortion in her conception of sun. She is not talking about the warmth of the sun but the blazing ferocity of the tropical Indian sun. So also the imagery of carnivorous plant which complements the patriarchal atrocity. Her confrontation to male dominance whether it is of resistance or submission is conspicuously different in the choice of natural images. Her rebellious resistance mostly find expression in fire symbols. The symbol of pyre and ocean dominates her introvert suicidal poems. Interestingly her strategy of resistance uses the same element of nature and dryness to encounter the patriarchal hostility typified in the symbol

of sun, she poses fire to resist the sun. This revenge strategy is very much evident in the natural world as used in the reversal of symbols in her poems also. Cruelty and indifference of her lover made her vindictive and desperate to be engaged in extra-marital affairs which can be seen as a vengeance in the poem "The Freaks":

" It is only to save my face I, flaunt
At times a grant flamboyant lust."

The ecocritical approach to the poem 'Forest Fire' affirms that her reaction is the mirror reflection of what she receives. The analogy can be found in the natural disaster due to man-made ecological distortion which is often called the revenge of nature. In an equal vein the poet says in 'Forest Fire':

" Like a forest fire that
Consumes and with each killing gains
a wilder
Brighter charm"

This fire will obviously consume and destroy both. This could be a prophetic vision to the near apocalyptic future as a corollary to environmental degradation in present day world. Das describes a harsh and sun-pierced tropical world full of death where the poet herself feels a 'hunger to take in with greed like a forest fire that-consumes'. In this point Eunice De Souza said,:" against a background of this fraught landscape on to which the poet projects so much of her inner sense of dirt and sexual disgust, Kamala Das plays out her roles of unhappy women, unhappy wife, mistress to young men, mother, reluctant nymphomania, pinning for the lost joys of innocence and childhood."

In her suicidal poems it is water a contradictory element to fire which is prominently present. Ocean or sea is to be

found as an appropriate objective correlative of such mental state. Sea resides there as an entity opposed to heterosexuality which can no more be gendered. Sea beacons her to abandon heterosexuality which has since been the reason of suffering and disappointment. Thus we see a strong aversion or disgust for body in her suicidal poems. Unfortunately Kamala Das could not avoid the dualism between body and soul which has been considered by ecofeminists as a source of disequilibrium social structure. Ecocritics discarded the dichotomy between body and soul as they consider it misleading and often stress on the intrinsic nature or soul than the extrinsic nature or body but in the poem 'The Suicide', Kamala Das is eager to locate the inner chamber of sea that can accommodate her soul. She assumes:

“The seas inner chambers
Are all my very warm.
There must be a sun slumbering
At the vortex of the sea.”

Interestingly we find here the mellowed down 'sun' is capable of generating warmth quite contradictory to the blazing sun discussed earlier. This slumbering sun could either be the lover attributed with softer emotions as desired by the poet or the sun as a female deity as is found in Germanic paganism. The use of indefinite article before sun makes it just another sun, another possibility of making a matriarchal eco-friendly world different from the recent one.

While repositioning Kamala Das as an ecofeminist we cannot overlook the fact that she is too engrossed with herself and her man of love to be explicitly concerned or conscious of environment. She is in a

way more anthropocentric than ecocentric. Ecological concerns are not placed at the foreground of her poetry rather relegated to the background existing as a backdrop or symbol. But as far as Ecocriticism concerns itself with pastoral genre (an obvious place for the literary and artistic expression of environmental concerns), we can extract an ecocritical as well as an ecofeminist perspective in Kamala Das's poetry. Her poetry has kindred tendency like the pastoral genre of quitting modernity for a more natural and simple and intrinsic way of life. Her poem often switches over retrospectively to her grandmother's house. This involuntary mental time travel is suggestive of some lack of sympathetic environment. The inability of patriarchy to ensure an ecofriendly or gender friendly society compels the poet to retrieve the pass days spent in her grandmother's house where the ecological atmosphere was congenial. The patriarchal environment is restrictive to her female self. She feels entrapped like a swallow – a migrating bird in a foreign atmosphere. Ornithologists have found out that due to the growing number of skyscrapers in metropolis and pollution, major migrating birds loose the way at night confusing the lights of the buildings as constellations. It causes mass mortality of the birds that slam into windows, walls, floodlights etc. Urbanisation at the cost of environment becomes harmful for both the natural world and women. Like the swallow the poet is also lost in the maze of the city life as described in the poem 'The Old Playhouse':

“You planned to tame a swallow, to
hold her
In the long summer of your love so
that she would forget

Not the raw seasons alone, and the
home
Left behind but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and
the endless
Pathways of the sky.”

The natural growth of a woman is stunted
which found expression in a vivid imagery
in the poem ‘The Stone Age’:

“You turn me into a bird of stone, a
granite
Dove”

Kamala Das’s poems are replete with
associations and images which represent a
grim, arid, exanimate picture of city which
is polluted both intrinsically and
extrinsically as has been depicted in the
poem ‘In Love’:

“ At noon
I watch the sleek crows flying
Like poison on wings”

In patricentric city life, Kamala Das sets
herself in search of her grandmother’s
land---a matriarchal paradise. It is
interesting to note how the imageries and
the natural background changes when the
poet reunites with her childhood memories
in the lap of nature in Malabar. In the
poem ‘The Suicide’ the sea reminds of the
pale green pond in Malabar. She finds her
normal self revived which otherwise, has
been curled into the coil of silence:

“I am happy swimming
Happy, happy, happy...
The only moment I know well
Is certainly the swim.
It comes naturally to me.”

We find how the same imageries used to
describe her disappointment against
patriarchal society, are changing their
connotation when associated with her
experience in her grandmother’s house.
Thus the summer month in Malabar house
is no more ‘blazing’ but ‘bright’. We find
her freedom most appropriately manifested
in her swimming in the cold green pond.

“I had a house in Malabar
And a pale green pond.
I did all my growing there
In the bright summer months.”

Her grandmother’s house with its flora and
fauna becomes Kamala Das’s ecological
niche which is not a simple retreat to the
idyllic life as a safe refuge from modernity
but also a desire to re-create that
matrilineal ethos of love in an eco-friendly
atmosphere. This longing has been
beautifully documented in ‘My
Grandmother’s House’

“Pick an armful of
Darkness to bring it here to lie
Behind my bedroom door ...”

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