

"An Introduction" by Kamala Das=Critical Analysis=

"An Introduction" is an autobiographical poem by Kamala Das. It is confessional in tone and modern in style. It is blunt, bitter and straightforward. The poem, in a very cryptic and epigrammatic way, dives deep into the inner chambers of mind and digs out the real self which generally remains subdued. It also contains some beautiful images and symbols, words and phrases which often attract the attention of the readers.

T.S. Eliot, in his well known essay, "Tradition and Individual Talent" shows that the man who suffers and the mind which creates are different things. He is also of the view that poetry is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality.

But the poems of Kamala Das are just the otherwise. They present the truthful picture of her life, her emotions of love and sex, her revolutionary attitude against the callous and cruel patriarchy and her bold pleading for feminism. She observes:

"A poet's raw material is not stone or clay, it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even from a moment."

In other words, as G.B. Shaw cannot write a single line without having a purpose in his mind, in the same way, Kamala Das cannot write beyond her personal experiences. In this respect, she is very close to Shakespeare, Balzac, Fielding, Standhal, Flaubert, Zola and Tolstoy who unlocked their hearts through their creative literature. About her attitude to art and writing, Kamala Das, in her poem, "Composition" observes:

"I must let my mind striptease

I must extrude

Autobiography"

The poem "An Introduction" opens with Kamala Das's attitude to politics. She says that she knows only the names of politicians like the days of weeks or months. She also writes about her parentage, native home and the language:

"I am Indian, very brown, born in

Malabar, I speak three languages write in

Two, dream in one."

She has a great fascination for English language. She wants to reveal her dreams through this language—half English, half Indian. This language is honest and human. But the people of her house tell her not to express her views in English. She is fed up with such types of restrictions posed by the domination of patriarchy. She is of the opinion that the language which a man speaks easily and conveniently must be free from clutches and restrictions:

"....Do not write in English, they said,

English is not your mother tongue.

Why not leave me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,

Every one of you? Why not let me speak in

Any language I like?"

Despite the dos and don'ts of the family members, Kamala Das went on airing her views in English. She says that English voices her joys, her longings, her hopes. This language is useful for her as cawing is to crows or roaring to the lions:

"It is human speech, the speech of the mind that is

Here and do there, a mind that sees and hears and

Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech

Of trees in storm or monsoon clouds or of rain or the

Incoherent mutterings of the blazing

Funeral pyre."

It is interesting to note that in this poem the word "they", stands for the members of her family and the other people of society who are conservative and patriarchal in their attitude to individual and social norms and practices. On the connotative scale, they also show the traditional and patriarchal domination of any societal framework where the women have little freedom to voice their views against and against them. In this poem, the repetition of the word 'they' comes again and again which reminds us of the term 'they' in the poem "The Night of the Scorpion" by Nissim Ezekiel. The word "he" in "An Introduction" is an imagistic variation upon the word 'they' which has a same implication of the sadist approach of patriarchy.

Now Kamala Das recalls her adolescent age when she is on the threshold of puberty, neither child nor young enough to be married. But the patriarchy of her family gets her married to a youth of sixteen.

"...I was child, and later they

Told me I grew, for I became tall my limbs

Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. When

I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask

For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the bedroom

And closed the door. He did not beat me

But my sad woman body felt so beaten.

The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank

Pitifully.”

These lines deal with the poet's truthful portrayal of the sad woman body of Kamala Das, her piteous plight under the patriarchal domination, her yearning for love and freedom. They also show the miserable condition of an average Indian girl who is married immature to an unknown boy by the parents or the head of the family. Most of the parts of India where there is illiteracy, girls are supposed to be an unwanted thing and they are treated as dolls in the hands of their parents. They are viewed as burdens of the family. So, the head of the family wants to get the girl child married as soon as possible so that they may be able to free from the burden of the family.

The sentence “he drew a youth of sixteen” suggests this sense. In these lines, we get a very fine use of euphemism in the sentence “my limbs swelled and one or two places sprouted hair”. This sentence shows the age of puberty of a girl child. The age of puberty is full of new joys, emotions and a juvenile frenzy.

It is an age which needs love and freedom. But what happens to Kamala Das is just the otherwise. She is forcibly married to a man (Madhab Das) almost twice of her age and the door of the bedroom was closed. The closing of the bedroom door is again euphemistic and suggestive. It connotes the sexual copulation between the husband and wife so as to procreate issues. The closing of the bedroom door may also be interpreted metaphorically. The word ‘door’ is a universal symbol of liberty and freedom. So here the ‘closing of the door’ suggests the closing of liberty of a girl child. Now forward, she will have to live under the walls of patriarchy. It reminds us of the famous statement of Manusmriti which says that a woman is never free. Before marriage, she is protected by her parents, after marriage, by husband and after the death of the husband, by her children.

Well, the sentence ‘he did not beat me’ is also very suggestive. ‘He’ stands for the poetess's husband, an aged person. In this poem, he does not mean only the husband of Kamala Das, but it also suggests the universal masculine gender, the cruel and callous patriarchy that is notorious for creating unwanted bumps in the path of the women's freedom. The word ‘beat’ in this line has been connotatively used. It does not show the physical beating, but the sexual and mental torture. Perhaps this is why Kamala Das used the phrase ‘my sad woman body’. These lines also show the pathos and helplessness of a woman who feels like a bird caught in a cage. The sentence shrank pitifully arouses pity and pathos for the women. The sentence “The weight of my breath and womb crushed me” is equally very connotative. It connotes the responsibility of a girl child as a mother who gives birth to children and nourishes and nurses them. This shows that the immature age is not suitable for giving birth to a child, but the pity is that the girl child has to abide by the dictates of patriarchy and so she has to bear the weight of breast and womb.

These lines have a poetic integrity and stylistic cohesion. There is a fine fusion of both the feeling and the form. The poet has very carefully and judiciously used some linguistic techniques. Here, the language is very cacophonous. The sentences are not poetic but prosaic. There is not rhythm. Sometimes, the sentence is broken in the middle of the sentence. So, this technique has an objective correlative. It is an emotional equivalent of the feelings and thoughts of a miserable, vulnerable and deserted woman.

At the end of the first part of the poem, Kamala Das asserts boldly and frankly that after her marriage, she has to live in restrictions posed by the conservative men of the family. But she wanted to lead a life of freedom even after marriage. So, she often wore a shirt and her brother's trousers. She cut her hair short and ignored the womanliness. But it was against the attitude of the conservatives. So, they forbade her to do so. The poet observes:

"Dress in saris, be girl.

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

Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in, oh

Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit

On walls or peep in through our lace draped window"

Here in this stanza, Kamala Das's poetic excellence is worth noticing. It has both the thematic and linguistic integrity. In the thematic plane, it shows how the fate of a woman is confined only to be a girl, a domestic wife, a cook, and quarreller. It also shows how the women have been prevented from sitting on walls and peeping through the windows. On the linguistic and stylistic plane, it contains the beauty of words, phrases and structural devices. The repetition of the verb 'be' again and again shows the chains and restrictions of masculine gender. The sentences are very short containing only two words, e.g., Be cook, Be girl, Be wife, Fit in etc.

They suggest the confinement of women under the wall and their little activities in the other social, spiritual and political affairs. So, the shortness of sentences show the shortness of women in the eyes of men. The repetition of the verb also shows the anger mood of the men of the house. The words, 'belong' and 'categorizers' have rich poetic and symbolic implications. The term 'categorizers' which is polysyllable and cacophonous, suggests the so called conservatives or the champions of patriarchy who never say 'tell' or 'speak' but only 'cry'.

The word 'belong' is very connotative. It is here associated with the deep emotional and spiritual concern with the tradition, custom, rites, modesty and other healthy values of life which a woman has to follow. The sentence, "Be embroiderer" shows that one of the chief characteristics of a woman is to behave like the embroidery of a sari. The embroidery is always on the margin. It enhances the beauty of the sari. Similarly, the women, though they are marginalized, enhance the beauty of the home with their beauty, righteousness, morality and chastity. The phrase 'our lace draped window' shows the closed window of the

conservative men of the family. Window is the symbol of freedom and a sense of relief and openness. But here the window is under the control of the categorizers.

The second part of the poem again shows the monopoly of the patriarchal society.

“Be Amy, or be Kamala, Or better

Still, be Madhavikutty, It is time to

Choose a name, a role, Don't play pretending game;

Don't play at schizophrenia or be a

Nympho, Don't cry embarrassingly loud when

jilted in love.”

Here again in these lines we find the dos and don'ts of the male dominated family. A woman in such a family is never allowed to play schizophrenia and cry loud when jilted in love. These lines are heavily punctuated. This has been deliberately done by the poet to show the various gaps and bumps in the path of the women in a masculine society. This unwanted and undeserving restrictions made Kamala Das a rebel in her life. She boldly asserts that she wants a man who has love for her. She even goes to the extent of making an unbecoming, untraditional, illicit relation with a man:

“I met a man, loved him.

Call Him not by any name, he is every man

Who want woman, just as I am every

Woman who seeks love. In him.... The hungry haste of rivers,

In me. The oceans' tireless Waiting....”

Here in these lines the confession of Kamala Das is very bold and frank. She does not speak of herself but speaks for a large number of women who are devoid of love and liberty. This is why she uses the phrase 'every woman' and 'every man'. The illicit relation has been euphemistically and metaphorically rendered through the images of 'hungry rivers and tireless ocean'. The lover has been compared to the hungry rivers that are very eager to merge in the eternal ocean. On the other hand, the beloved has been compared to the tireless ocean. So, here, there is a fine correspondence between the major and the minor terms.

It is to be noted that the sexual portrayal of Kamala Das cannot be branded as pornographic. In literature nothing is moral or immoral. The only thing that matters in art and literature is the presentation. In other words, in the domain of art and literature, manner is more important than matter. There are several nude and vulgar statues of men and women in the caves of

Ajanta and on the temple of Konark, but they are recognized as fine pieces of art and beauty. So, in art and literature vulgarity may come, but it must come through poetic beauty. This is exactly what we find in these lines. The poetess has woven the vulgar theme of sex and pleasure through the medium of beautiful symbols and images. Here, her description recalls us of D.H. Lawrence and Arundhati Roy, the winner of the Booker prize, presents the theme of, sex through the beautiful connotative languages. In her well-known book 'The God of Small Things', Arundhati Roy takes the image of sailing in the river which contains a sexual implication :

"Clouded eyes held clouded eyes in a steady gaze and a luminous woman opened herself to a luminous man. She was as wide and deep as a river in spate. He sailed on her waters. She could feel him moving deeper and deeper into her. Frenzied. Asking to be let in further."

Well, Kamala Das, the worst sufferer of male chauvinism earnestly searches for a man who can quench her desire, the desire for love and freedom. She is in search of a man to whom she may share her grief and sorrow, pleasure and happiness.

So, she asks each and every one the question. "Who are you?" This question is very suggestive. She wants to be fully confirmed whether the man whom she is searching for is genuine or fake, conservative or liberal. And ultimately the man is found who calls himself "I". The poetess says that he is tightly packed like the sword in its sheath. Here the phrase 'sword in its sheath' is highly symbolic. It symbolizes the inner nature of behaviour of a man's personality which is always covered or hidden. Modern psychology says that man's mind is a complex organism which can not be fathomed so easily. It is, in the language of Freud, an iceberg. Virginia Woolf also points out that man's life is not a series of a gig lamps, but it is just like a semi transparent envelope.

So, on the psychological plane, this phrase shows the unfathomable and invisible self which is seldom present in man's actions. But Kamala Das is able to search for that man who was the same in both his inward and outward appearances. So she frankly observes that she enjoys the pleasures of life with him :

"...It is I who drink lonely

Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,

It is I who laugh, It is I who make love

And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying

With a rattle in my throat."

In these lines, we see the confession of Kamala Das on the metaphorical plane. Here the word, 'I' represents the inner soul of Kamala Das. It may suggest the inner longings of an average woman who wants to be loved by her husband free from the do's and don'ts of the categorizers. And now, the poetess has got what she wanted. But by doing so, she is both ashamed of and happy, sinner and saint:

“...I am sinner.

I am saint. I am the beloved and the

Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no

Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.”

These lines have got antithesis and balance. There is a figure oxymoron in the words 'sinner' and 'saint'. This paradoxical rendering of the inner psyche of a deserted woman has a close conformity with the poetry of T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats in the modern period. Kamala Das uses the word 'sinner' because she thinks that she has committed blunder by breaking the age-old rule of the religious bondage of marriage. But after the marriage, her husband treated her like an inanimate object. He was only concerned with the body of the poetess. So, there was only a sexual or physical union. But in the second part of the poem, we get love, the identification of emotions of the lover and the beloved, the physical as well as the spiritual reunion of the two souls leading to a state of parmananda or the cosmic bliss which a Yogi attains through penance. But the case of Kamala Das is opposite. She gets it not through penance but through pleasure. Perhaps this is why she says that she is both sinner and saint, beloved and betrayed.