

Kamala Das' Poem 'An Introduction': A Postcolonial Study**Gohar Ayaz**

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Abstract:

This paper will lead the readers to explore the colonial issues in Kamala Das's poem 'An Introduction'. Her ignorance of politics and British rulers within the Indian Society which is a rebellious act against colonizers and their prestige, use and support of a hybrid language instead of English language and Indian languages, writing in a Third Space, Eurocentric aptitude, call for the freedom of speech and act, rebellion against the set traditions; all these factors will be analyzed on the basis of Colonialism Theory. Double imprisonment of women by the colonizers and the patriarchal society has the glimpses in the poem under consideration. Escapism from these bonds and oppressed life is reflected in her poem. When the restrictions of the colonizers are over women is still facing other restrictions which are not less than those in the past. Every line of the poem is worth to explore in its Postcolonial study. In this poem she has been truly depicted as true Postcolonial poetess of India.

Key words: colonizer, Das, language, Postcolonial.

Introduction

Kamala Das is a renowned icon in Indian Literature. Das added 30 novels in Malayalam language and 3 anthologies of poetry into Indian Literature. She was born in 1934 at Malabar in Kerala is her place of birth. She got her early education at home and has secured high place in Malayalam literature because she has been writing poetry since her youth. She received some famous awards for her contribution to Malayalam as well as English Literature. She was awarded with the Poetry Award for the Asian PEN Anthology in 1964, the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for the best collection of short stories in Malayalam, and the Chaman Lal Award for fearless journalism. Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert accepted her as the only representative from Asia in their Norton Anthology of Literature by Women. Some of her work in English includes the novel *Alphabet of Lust* (1977), a collection of short stories, *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992), five books of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Poems* (1973), *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996). In 1999, Kamala Das converts to Islam and renames herself Kamala Surayya. 'An

Introduction' is the poem which is included as an opening poem in her collection *Old Playhouse and other Poems*. This paper is all about this poem in its post-colonial context.

Rational of the Study

At the beginning of the poem she tells her readers that she is not aware of the game of politics but she can quote the names of all the great politicians just like one can quote the names of days and weeks. She proves herself to be a true Indian. She regrets the charges of her friends, cousins and critics who criticize her not to write in English language but she is at her best in defending herself against this charge. She tells them that she is able to speak three languages, write in two and dream in one. The first three languages are referred to English, Hindi and Malayalam, the second two are referred to English and Malayalam and the last one in which she claims to dream is the language of poets and artists. She claims that every language in which she writes belongs to her. It becomes her own when she writes in it. She says that it is not pure English but half Indian i.e. a hybrid. She compares language with a human being. It gives the same feelings as a living thing. English language means to her a lot as cawing to crow and roaring to lion. This language is the speech of a mind that is here in India not there among the Colonizers. This is the language of a free mind which is able to see and hear not that of a slave mind. She enters her youth but she is informed by others that her limbs lengthened and other puberty secondary characteristics appeared. Now she is in need of love and a young man enters her room or life, locks her and make love with her. He does not beat her but she feels to be beaten. She feels to be crushed under the weight of her breasts and womb and feeling pity for herself. She adopts the getup of a boy but society does not allow her to such things. She is instructed now and then to wear and behave like a woman neither in schizophrenic manner nor like Nympho. She then meets a man who bears no name. He is also in search of a woman just like her who is in search of love. His behavior is like a gushing river and her wait is just like a tireless ocean. She asks everyone about this man but she only receives his answer that he is "I" who is fitted in this world just like a sword in a sheath. This man now speaks about himself that it is I who drink all the time in the hotels. I laugh, make love but feel shame. I am dying of a rattle in my throat. At the same time he is a sinner and saint, the beloved and the betrayed. His joys and aches are not the same with her and he calls himself "I".

From the very beginning of the poem glimpses of ignorance are observed. Das claims to be ignorant of the politics of her own country. She is a postcolonial writer but she is not aware of politics, a basic common knowledge. Colonizers used to keep their colonized people ignorant of the affairs of the country. They were considered as 'others' by the British people. They were not allowed even to know about the politics of their own country. In the very next line Das consciously ignores the names of the British rules of India. She begins with the name of Nehru, Indian first Prime Minister. She is now resolving against the age of darkness under the British rule. It is a rebellious act against the Colonizers to ignore their names. She acclaim with proud that she knows the names of her native rulers like 'days of week' and 'names of months'.

Kamala Das now reveals her identity in postcolonial way. She is going to shatter the western concept on 'Nation'. Frantz Fanon's ideas in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* about the nation, nationalism, and national consciousness have been especially influential. He rejected the Western conception of the nation as a "universal standpoint" that subsumes all particulars (i.e., individual human lives) in the fulfillment of its own abstract freedom. Universality instead belongs to the people who comprehend themselves as a nation. The people's struggle is largely the struggle "to make the totality of the nation a reality to each citizen" (Fanon, 1967, p. 200), Das does not affiliate her name with her family, father or mother rather she identifies herself as an 'Indian'. Here she projects Indian nation as a separate and dominant nation. It shows her attitude towards freedom. She does not want to call herself as 'Oriental' or 'Other'. She is proud of being an Indian who is free from the bitter attitude of British rulers. Das know that Indians are considered inferiors by the British because of their race and colour. After disclosing her Indian identity she accepts that she is brown and not white like them but still she would never want to be like them physically. Fanon pointed out:

National consciousness is the only thing which helps us to have our own identity. He says that national consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension (p. 247)

What Das is doing here? She is projecting this idea of 'National Consciousness'. Homi Bhaba has described the impacts on the language of a colonized nation. He discovered that English language left a great deal of impressions on the language of the people who are recently freed. They received a gift of a mixed language as a result of the combination of English language with that of the native languages. Homi K. Bhaba uses the term 'Hybrid' for this new emerged language. He supports this "hybrid as a tool for the voice of oppressed" (Bhaba, 1994, p. 120) Das in her poem claims to be able to speak in three languages i.e. Malayalam, Hindi and English. Her most of the writings are in two languages i.e. English and Malayalam but she posses the same language of poets and artists for her dreams. Though she belongs to the category of 'Others' yet she posses the same senses as those of the 'Self' i.e. British or white people. She faced a great deal of criticism from her friends and critics. She was blamed to have a slavish sentiment that is why she is using English language for her poetry. But she rejects this blame on the basis of Bhabha's views regarding the significance of use of Hybrid language. She tells her critics and readers that language is not confined to a specific person or locality rather any person speaking or writing in any language feels that language to belong to him/her. She says that any language which she speaks or in which she writes becomes her own. All its properties belong to her and she can easily express her feelings in that language. She tells them that they should not act as colonizers who used to suppress the feelings of their slaves. She is a free woman and not a slave any more who has her own choice of selection.

She is now supporting in humorous words the usefulness of this language. Though the language she speaks is neither pure English nor pure Indian language. It seems to be funny but it is an interesting language because she can convey her anti-colonial feelings to the British people. This is a Hybrid language which she loves to write in and speak. Her interest in the use of hybrid language is compared to the cawing of crow and roaring of lions. Das rejects the man made difference of human beings on the basis of race, gender, class and nationality. She argues that all the human beings have the same feelings and emotions. Whatever their language is they think and behave in the same way. Though she uses English language but it's her own mind's thoughts which belong to an Indian post-colonial free woman. These thoughts do not belong to 'Them'. In the due course of them poem she will prove that her language is a Hybrid one not pure English by using some words from Hindi and Malayalam. She compared her free post-colonial thoughts with that of a mind which have the ability to see and hear. Now, she is comparing the thoughts of the slave colonial mind with various silent things. The colonial people's thoughts are compared to the silence and deafness of trees in the storm. Storm can do anything to a tree and tree does not resist to it. Same was the case with the Indians during the British rule; whatever British wanted them to do they used to obey their orders without showing any resistance to their cruelties and injustices. Next she compares the slave Indians with Monsoon clouds which have no power and moves according to the wishes of storm or wind. The rain is a slave of the storm too. The funeral pyre does not want to burn one's body but it is helpless in doing so just as Colonized acted as they were directed by the Colonized rulers. Here the use of Hindi word 'Monsoon' is also significant in proving that she is using a post-colonial hybrid word.

The clause "they told me I grew" (Das, 1973, p. 1) implies that due to the physical changes occurring in her body, 'they' (family, society, cultural expectations) instruct her that it is time to grow up and conduct herself in a manner befitting of a woman. She is now in the prison of Patriarchal society. When she got escape from the foreign rulers she got entangled in another prison. So a post-colonial woman is not only under the influence of Colonizers but also she is a puppet in the hands of men. Here Das wants to show the idea of "double imprisonment of women" (Spivak, 1994, p. 26). However, despite physical maturity, she herself does not feel 'grown'; she is still an emotional child, tender and in need of love. As made clear in the last line, the physical attributes "my breasts and womb" (Das, 1973, p. 1) that "make her a grown woman oppress and burden her" (James, 2011. p. 60). Though she is now a free woman but under the control of another master but this time in the shape of husband. According to Gardiner, "a young woman 'spends adolescence looking for the man, through whom she will fulfill herself because the maturational stages of identity and intimacy are conflated for her" (Gardiner, 1981, p. 350) This certainly seems to be the case in the line, "I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask for" (Das, 1973, p. 1) in which the speaker's desire for emotional intimacy prompts her behaviour and responses, and "thus is closely tied to her sense of personal identity" (James, 2011, p. 60) The phrase "I shrank pitifully" (Das, 1973, p. 1) signifies that she has become a slave once again. Here the traditional roles of a woman, especially in the culturally-bound context of India, are

almost humorously summed up in the stereotypical tasks of wearing sarees, doing needlework and being at loggerheads with the servants. She wants a voice for the 'Subaltern' as coined by Spivak. The speaker expresses her contempt at these "restrictions that limit her sense of 'womanliness'" (Spivak, 1994, p. 27) by trying to ignore them and by changing her outward appearance. However, limitations of the mind are far more severe than those of the body. "Although Das defies some of these cultural expectations, she is also bound and oppressed by them" (James, 2011, p. 66) She as a rebellion and resistance to the restrictions begins to behave like man as she is wearing her brother's trousers and having cut her hairs like boys. She wants to leave with the notions of a slave woman. She wants to be free like a boy who wanders freely. The use of the word 'Saree' in line 35 also comes from Indian language which is used in this English poem which is a post-colonial attitude of Das.

She is again instructed by her family and the society to do the things which a woman does. These restrictions make her life bounded but she is not going to accept this life of slavery. Of course she is a post-colonial woman and she wants freedom not only from the British but also from the bonds of the society. She does not want to be like a stereotype girl who is always busy in cooking or make up. She considers Saree as a chain of the men dominance that is why she is not going to accept this advice to wear it. When a girl becomes grown up she is placed in a category i.e. sister, mother, daughter and wife. Das is also instructed to choose one of these categories but she is post-colonial woman and wants to be free of all the bonds. She rejects all these categories but wants to make a room of her own. She is instructed not to cry for her freedom or her choice. Her voice is always suppressed but she constantly shows resistance against this masterly attitude towards her. She does not stand only for herself but she is generalizing herself for the sake of all women as pointed out by Juli James:

On the whole, Das's love poetry embodies purely personal grievances, but here the woman-persona speaks as 'every woman'. In doing so, she turns personal into public, by generalizing; she invites other women to embrace her experiences of shame, guilt, hurt and bless as their own, in the same way that she offers to embrace theirs (p. 66)

James analyzed it by looking through its one side but it is not the whole story of women only. As soon as we reach line number 45 we begin to observe Master-Slave relationship. Master is in the shape of a husband and in generalized form calling himself 'I' and the speaker or the poetess as woman and in generalized form the slave who cannot escape his/her slavery life. She has grown love or affection with her master and her master is not letting her free. The master is a hungry fellow having lust to invade that's why he is compared to a 'hungry river' in line 48-49. Rivers flow with gushing sound towards oceans which are calm and waiting for the rivers waters. Same is the case with the colonizers and the colonized. Colonizers are compared to the gushing rivers while the poor and calm colonized are like ocean that waits for the arrival of the enthusiastic waters of rivers. The poetess's identification with the ocean means that she is going to be

enslaved by her husband who is coming towards her with hunger. When the person she met for the first time is inquired about his name his reply is 'it's I' again generalization. He is found everywhere means that he is a master and all the masters have the same attitude towards their slaves. It does not matter what his name is and from where he belongs. That is the reason the poetess is not told by that man about his name. Names are not important deeds are important because a man's name is only remembered with the relation to his deeds. The significance of the repeated use of the word 'I' is that Das wants to tell that this 'I' may be anybody. And this 'I' is ready to invade her because he is prepared enough to attack her freedom. His preparedness for the invasion is compared with the "sword in the sheath"¹⁵. This man behaves like Colonizers who used to drink and plane at midnight about their conspiracies against the colonized people. Now the shift from colonial attitude to the post-colonial is observed in the words of this man. He accepts that he 'makes love' and laugh but after making all this he feels shame because he know that he is not doing the right thing. In other words he is criticizing British people who knowingly did the wrong things. They used to do it to keep the colonizers oppressed but they felt guilty in their hearts just like he is repenting at his laughing and love making. The use of the consecutive phrases 'I am sinner' and 'I am saint' is a good combination of two opposite meanings. Here the invading man considers himself as the sinner and accepts that he pretends to be a saint. British people came to India in the guise of saints. They claimed that they want to civilize them by teaching them morality and values but their mission was not to teach morality but to get the benefits from the Indian land and to make its inhabitants their slaves. They knew that they are not saints in true sense instead they are the sinners. He is 'the beloved and the betrayed' implies that though the British believed that they are loved by their slaves yet it was not true. A colonizer never missed a single chance of betrayal towards their masters. They just pretended to obey them out of love but the reality was that they obeyed them out of fear. Fear is a sickness which compels a person to subdue.

Now the Speaker 'I' reveals his weaknesses and tells her that the joys which he enjoys do not belong to her and the troubles which he is facing also do not belong to her. This comes true about the Colonizers. If we compare this man with British rulers it is inferred that they had their own joys and luxuries which were not available to their subjects. Besides these joys they had so many problems and troubles in their job which were hidden from the eyes of the common men. Indians believed that they were enjoying their lives but they did not know about the aches of their lives. At the end of the poem this man who was called 'I' by everyone, now calls himself 'I'. It makes him different from her. He is identified with the West while she with East as Edward W. Said (1978) points out in his book *Orientalism* the difference "between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')" (p. 43) It shows that though the age of colonialism is over yet its effects are still prevailing in the Post-colonial Indian society.

Conclusion

Kamala Das emerged as a great poetess in India. She wrote many of her works under the shade of feminism but her poetry reveals her post-colonial attitude towards the issues discussed in her poetry. Her poem "An Introduction" is interpreted by a large number of researchers on the basis of feminism but this paper dealt with its post-colonial interpretation. Her support of use of English language and then its mixing with that of other Indian languages shows the glimpses of post-colonialism. Her rebellion from her husband is taken as a rebellion against the tyranny of colonizers. 'Self' and 'Other' are depicted as colonial issues. Colour discrimination is identified. Short and long her poetry is open for new researchers to explore other themes as this paper have set a ground for them.

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