



Representation of feminine sensibility: A comparative analysis of Judith wright and Kamala Das

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Abstract

Exploring the unsaid and in-depth feelings of womanhood is portrayed in the writings of Kamala Das and Judith Wright. Judith Wright, Australian writer famous for her unconventional approaches to burning issues of the day including love, marriage and their effects both good or bad. Kamala Das, famous bilingual writer from Kerala, India used to write her poems both in Malayalam and English. Kamala Das was famous for her confessional mode of writing including in her autobiography 'My Story'. The two writers, Kamala Das and Judith Wright were very much interested in the confessional mode of writing. The cultural diversity and panorama of experiences are different, yet their perception of femininity binds them together. Their poetry fought against the patriarchal society which prevailed in the commonwealth countries. It has become a tool that unleashes the various hues and shades of feminine sensibility. Concepts of love, longingness, motherhood, suffering in a domestic sphere are dealt in a very similar way in both of their writings. Judith Wright graphically portrays motherly joys and feelings. Kamala Das also conveys such poetic undertones in her work.

Keywords: commonwealth literature, patriarchal society, confessional writing, femininity

Introduction

"Sensibility is the fragrance of an artist's personality. Just as a flower is distinguished by its fragrance and colour or a bird by its song, an artist is identified and distinguished by his or her sensibility"

When we consider the feminine and masculine psyche, their understanding of the world comes from two different ways. It may be a result of shared norms, beliefs and the means of upbringing. Innumerable studies proved that men are more aggressive and dominant than woman. The feminine mind love to nurture and express their inner feelings in a more open line. All such insignificant emotions create their life progression. When we notice around, taking care of new born, feeding and other motherly duties are being carried out by the female partner in almost every species. Sociologists believe that the subordination of woman to man had been the history of so many communities in world. But the process of industrialization has changed the role of women in the modern scenario. And their sex identities are clearly underlined in the world in its comments on sex roles, Encyclopaedia of Psychology strikes attention to increasing equality of woman, sexual emancipation, a lessening of dual moral standards, i.e., in a reduction of all male privileges". Apart from it, the feminine character as an artist and as an individual has been beautifully shown by Virginia Woolf who writes:

"It is only when we can measure the way of life and the experience of life made possible to the ordinary woman that we can account for the success or the failure".

The feminine sensibility thus deals with the experience of the world from a viewpoint of a woman. The woman as a woman and the woman as an artist will be the integrated self in which feelings of love, sex and power will be suggested inclusively. Actually, the feminine sensibility is the fragrance of the woman's personality which shines with a touch of genius in her poetical works. The woman artist not

only agonizes but she also generates her art delicately and impulsively in the light of other ideas. A study of Indian women poets in English demands, at the outset, a clarification of a few issues related to it. The very term "women poets", implies an attempt to isolate "women poets" from "men poets", and consider them in a group only on the basis of sex. This inevitably raises the question whether there is anything like "feminine sensibility" or feminine ways of expression. We can assess it at the scale of psychological and sociological paradigms. Psychology studies the feminine and the masculine concepts from biological as well as psychological points of view.

Judith Wright is a remarkable figure in Australian literature, who is also known as an environmentalist. She started to publish poems in the late 1930s in literary journals. As a poet she made her debut with *The Moving Image* (1946), in which she displayed her technical excellence without burdens of fashionable inclinations. Most of the poems were written in wartime. In *The Trains* Wright took the threat of the war in the Pacific as a subject. The main theme in the volume was the poet's awareness of time, death, and evil on a universal scale. With the following collections Wright gained a reputation as a wholly new voice in literature with a distinctly female perspective. The title poem from *Woman to Man* (1949) dealt with the sexual act from a woman's point of view. *The Maker* paralleled the creation of a poem and the creation of a child. Several of her early poems such as *Bullocky* and *Woman to Man* became standard anthology pieces. Wright also wrote love poems to her husband. His death in 1966 and her increasing anxiety of the destruction of the natural environment brought more pessimistic undercurrents in her work. The distinction between the "feminine" and the "masculine", from the points of view of psychology, psycho-analysis and sociology emphasizes the need for a critical approach to poetry by women as an independent phenomenon.

Feminism has provided a new dimension to the world of woman's identity. It has changed the whole scenario of society.

The notion of woman is radically problematic because it is packed with the over determinations of male hegemony invoking in every formulation on the limit, contrasting other, or mediated self as a reflection of culture made on the control of women. Recent theorists resist the universalizing tendency of cultural feminism and highlight the variances between women and men on the basis of gender. Wright uses phrases like 'wrecked skull', 'earth's mouth', 'scarlet breath', 'fountain of hot joy', and 'living ghost of death' to describe the Australian landscape. Words like 'skull' and 'ghost' relates to the land being devastated by the invaders. In many ways this poem sums up the angst of Wright who reverts back to her 'pastoral' past by using the pronoun 'I'. Words like 'skull', 'flesh', 'blood', and 'death' indicate her physical longing to connect to her land.

It is worth noting that the themes of Kamala Das's Poetry focus the background of feminine sensibilities. Kamala Das wrote about the woman who suffers in the society. Almost all her works depict her concern for the social and cultural construction of gender, raising her voice against marginalization and exploitation of woman. She has shown that woman have no separate existence free from men. Thus, Srinivasan Iyenger writes; "Kamala Das has a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an intensive, largely, men-made world". Kamala Das's Feminine sensibility is not being found in her frank confession of her sexual life or in a detailed description of female organs. But it is expressly manifested in her attitude to love, in the experiences receiving love and agony etc. The poem 'An Introduction' has variously been interpreted as intensely autobiographical. The poem is an attempt to assert the poet's individuality and feminine identity against social and cultural conformity. She wrote:

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

This is how Kamala Das proclaims herself. The woman in Kamala Das challenges the society and chooses to cut short her hair and wear a shirt. She wants to forget her womanliness which makes another cry.

"Dress in sarees, be girl Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be a cook, Be a quarreller with servants. Fit into, Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit on walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows. Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better Still, be Madhavikutty."

Kamala Das speaks here as a liberated woman, who resents 'the cocoon' built around her and desires to flit about without any restrictions. The fairer sex receives a better deal from this sensitive poetess, who airs out its grievances and sufferings in a striking fashion. Unquestionably, Kamala Das is a poetess of love and sex. As such, she is not so much preoccupied with the metaphysical quest of a restless soul, nor with the formulation of any theory of poetry. She writes almost invariably about the power of love and the appeal of

the body. She confesses that she wrote the poems in the book 'Summer in Calcutta' to "make a man love me, to break down his resistance." As an honest poet of love, she looks very frank and naive, without the intellectual pride and the domestic air of the well-known Australian poetess, Judith Wright. It should, however, be remembered that Kamala Das wrote her poetry against a more conservative and tabooed society than that of Judith Wright. She has, therefore, more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual liberty and identity.

Kamala Das's poetry contains an acute concern for decay and death. Her autobiography, bordering on fiction occasionally, was actually written during one of her serious illnesses. It is not that she is afraid of death, and the last portions of 'My Story' tell us that she was sometimes even ready to welcome it, but physical decay and destruction definitely haunt her inescapably. In her 'My Story' Kamala Das tells us that she, at the age of 19, suffered a nervous breakdown as a neglected wife and that she was commanded to live all alone in a closed room with sunshine peeping through a window. Kamala Das in her poem expresses her ideas against arranged marriages, which are usually inspired by the parent conveniences more than those of the couples are. 'The Sunshine Cat', in this poem, too, like the earlier ones, finds a berth in 'summer in Calcutta' (1965). Sexual humiliation, which forms the main theme of Kamala Das's autobiography, 'My Story' is the central experience here in. It recounts the tale of a woman too much wronged by the male world around her. The poem directly highlights the miseries of a forlorn woman. The men treated her very badly- the man she loved did not reciprocate her feelings and he was basically selfish and a coward, the husband, who neither loved her nor used her, but who was a ruthless watcher, who also made of the same grain; the band of cynics. She ultimately turned to for her emotional gratification was all selfish and egotistic.

Kamala Das is deliberately frank about her personal and private relation within and without marriage. The writers like Kamala Das do be certain that not all relations are necessarily sexual. Her account of marriage in My Story is important for many reasons. First, it is this theme in her story that becomes a central ground to hold the significant ironic state of affairs, enigmatic codes, and segments that change her selfhood. Secondly, it is the marriage of Kamala Das that made her youth not simply sad and isolated but helpless and doomed to the loss of warmth, as if she had to pay the price of her spontaneity and innocence to the negative attitudes of husband, the related and not- so related people around her. Thirdly, it is through marriage that Kamala Das's emotional skirmishes were fused with her physical struggle and intensified her creativity. Next, it is only because of marriage that sincerity and sensibility of her delicate mind were battered. Her integrity was cracked due to her suffering in the marital life.

Kamala Das's poems are a celebration of femininity and she uses the image of body several times in her writings. Judith wright is also using body as a metaphor in many of her writings.

"Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare.
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare."
(The Suicide)

One of the most controversial and celebrated themes in Kamala Das's poems and short stories are her explicit descriptions about sexual union and love. Her controversial autobiography *Ente Katha (My Story)* depicted her troublesome experiences in the past. As a child, an adolescent, a young wife, and an old woman, Kamala reconnects various aspects of a woman's journey to connect with her sexual identity. In *Composition* she writes: now here is a girl with vast sexual hungers, a bitch after my own heart.

Kamala often touched upon homosexuality be it the attraction among young girls at the boarding school, or an episode that described her husband and his friend. In *My Story*, Kamala writes: At this time my husband turned to his old friend for comfort. They behaved like lovers in my presence. To celebrate my birthday, they shoved me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in. I stood for a while wondering what two men could possibly do together to get some physical rapture, but after sometime my pride made me move away. The poem *The Looking Glass* needs special mention regarding the explicit talks about love and the misery in staying long. That also explains how we must realize the sensual pleasures and elements.

Confessional poetry is the poetry genre that is mainly focused on extreme moments of individuals, their private experience and psyche. Confessional poets 'private experiences are revealed in their poetry. Confessional poetry is quite diverse from traditional poems. This genre breaks down the traditional definition of poetry and explores new poetic style where poets pour out their inner feelings and unspoken words through their words. Confessional poetry is famous both for male and female poet but female poets theme; writing and style are different from male poets. For the female poets, confessional poetry is a medium where they can expose their psyche. Through this genre woman poets strive for self-definition. Female confessional poets struggle to find connection between the name that was set for her by the society and the name that they want to give themselves.

The confessional poets exposed the subliminal pain buried deep in their disturbed psyche with such touching sincerity, that the reader was unwillingly drawn towards their world and even found themselves identifying with their usual state of mind. They had a personal charisma which was quite unique and which was reflected in their poetry. Her first poem was, as gather from *My Story*, about a doll that had lost its head and had to remain headless for eternity. As Das recalls,

"Each poem of mine made me cry.

My brother illustrated the verses and
Wrote faintly political articles".

Finally, Kamala Das describes herself in the following lines:

".....I am sinner I am saint, I am beloved and the
betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours. No
Aches which are not yours.
I too call myself I"

She seems to be no different from other human beings, that like every other human being she is sometimes sinful and sometimes pious. Kamala Das acknowledges her failures to achieve a required dimension in man-women relationship. Her criticism of man is appropriate because she does not find an equal response from the man. For instance, in her poem 'The Freaks' which is also confessional in nature and

tone, the poet presents the man-woman relationship.

"Rhyme, my old cymbal,

I don't clash you as often, or trust your old promises music
and unison.

I used to love Keats, Blake; now I try haiku for its honed
brevities, its inclusive silences.

(From 'Brevity' in *Notes at Edge*)

Judith Wright in her poem *Sonnet* writes in a way that
nature and human psyche are completely interconnected.

"Now let the draughtsman of my eyes be done marking the
line of petal and of hill.

Let the long commentary of the brain be silent. Evening and
the earth are one, and bird and tree are simple and stand
still."

In the poem, *The Seal*, Kamala Das reminisces her past
through the imagery of sea. She remembers the fortunate
time of her past and feels nostalgic in the present. We can
identify an intense desire in Das to merge with the sea.
Another poem, "The Suicide" is constructed as a
conversation between the poet and the sea.

"O sea, I am fed up

I want to be simple

I want to be loved

And if love is not to be had,

I want to be dead...

(*The Descendants*)

One gets a similar sense of death and sea image in her
poems. "The invitation" is in a dialogue form between the
poetess and the sea, where the sea offers one kind of death.
"The sea garrulous today come in, come in, what do you
lose by dying, and besides, your losses are my gains."

A person's behaviour is always relation-oriented. It is
relations which can make or mar the atmosphere at the
workplace as also in the family and the society as a whole.
Man-woman relationship is essentially based on mutual
understanding, love, respect and trust which are in essence
the bed-rock of whole code of ethics governing these
relations. Kamala Das felt the lack of love at quite an early
age. Her parents' behaviour was indifferent towards her.
They were not so considerate ones as it is reflected in her
autobiography. This is about her father; 'He was not of an
affectionate nature so. We grew up more or less neglected,
and because we were of ourselves. As neglected children in
a Social-Circle that pampered the young.

Man-woman relationship has its own grace and aroma.
Admitted that our parent Adam was the lone sovereign of
what he surveyed in the universe newly created for his
benefit and amusement, when the beauty and boundary of
nature were mere addition of his condition. But he was soon
bored and fed up, to powers that he and his position was
more than accepted when Eve was created from one of his
ribs. In religion-mythical terms, Eve was flesh of Adam's
flesh and blood of his blood, she was created for
companionship and in a way, it established his primacy in
human relations Kamala Das excels in delineating human
relationships. And in that most particular poem there
hazardous feeling on that particular things in which there is
going to see the things that, A full of things and cistern. Not
short time and complete itself. With the chief weapons of
snakes and it is cooling and not sounding'. Kamala Das
could not get affection in her childhood. She says about her
parents that; 'They took us for granted and considered us

mere puppets, moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us, they did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that were developing independently.' The sense of loneliness in childhood finds transference in her adult life as well. In marriage, she had dreamt, she would get love. With the key of love, she tries to unlock the complexities of human psyche and its insistent demands;

"Their voices

Were harsh, their song melancholy; they sang of Lovers dying and of children left unborn...

Some beat their drum,

And wailed and writhed in vacant ecstasy."

(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems)

There is passivity as well as rebellion against a man-dominated world. But there is no escape from conflict, from a sense of sterility. She wants real love but despairs when this it denied to her. In "the suicide" it is suggested. "My love is an empty gift, a gilded empty container, good for, nothing else"(Captive Summer in Calcutta) the complex mental state is reflected in the very moment and jerk of thought; she frankly lays bare her women's heart, when she says. To give, we are all alike, we women, in our wrapping of hairless skin. An all-embracing discussion is needed to pin-point the right place for a woman in society. The importance of woman has been recognized in literature on various levels. For centuries, the human experience has been synonymous with the masculine experience. Right from the beginning of their life, women are forced to feel dwarfed and acquire a highly circumscribed world-view. But it becomes a hard fact that in the institution of marriage she loses her place. She feels herself only as a machine.

Both the poets expresses her obsession with death in her works. In the poem 'The Company of Lovers' by wright also provides this theme.

"Death marshals up his armies round us now.

Their footsteps crowd too near.

Lock your warm hand above the chilling heart and for a time I live without my fear.

Grope in the night to find me and embrace, for the dark preludes of the drums begin, and round us round the company of lovers, death draws his cordons in."

The disillusionment and suffering, lost expectations are visible in her intense desire to merge with the idea of death, it becomes a mode of escape that can bring everlasting joy in most of her prominent works.

Short telling poem "A Request" she voices her thoughts about love, life and death: When I die do not throw The meat and bones away but pile them up and let them tell by their smell What life was worth On this earth What love was worth in the end. She imagines people picking up her broken face from the debris of house wrecks, changed a little with years. Both of the writers grew in totally different culture and social settings. Yet their writings show several similar features and themes are also ones that concern the feminine sensibility and emotions.

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