

The World of Kamala Das and Imtiaz Dharker : A Comparative Study

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Abstract. As far as post independent Indian English poets are concerned Kamala Das is one of the pioneering Indo-English poets who has contributed immensely to the growth and development of modern Indian English poetry. During the first phase of Hindu anglian poetry indeed, in the 1950s the spirit of modernism was almost alien to the poets of this period. Their main preoccupation was the spirit of nationalism and the war of independence during partition of country. It was only in the sixties that things began to take a new dimension where a new generation of young poets took control of the Indo-Anglian poetic realm. Kamala Das is one of the most powerful voices of this post colonial era. Her poetry is a frank and straightforward expression of feminine sensibility. She revolts against the exploitation of women. She expresses her anger against the male dominance in the society. She attempted to establish her identity as woman through her poems. At the same time she tried to impart an identity to Indian women. So her poetry is confessional and autobiographical to a great extent but at times she universalizes what is personal. In "An Introduction" Das explores powerful themes of feminism, equal rights, freedom and marriage. This poem is a very clear feminist statement that advocates of free choice for all women. Imtiaz Dharker deals with the replication of the female histories and the portrayal of the female subject as victim agent. She also explores the struggle for freedom, hope, social change, feminine sensibility, womanhood, religious strife, gender conflict, misinterpretation of religion, hypocrisy, practised in the name of God. A ruthless oppression of women, socio-political unrest, the sufferings of women, child marriage, illiteracy, ill treatment of widows, dowry deaths, ill-matched marriages and female foeticide etc. are some of the common themes that run through her poem. *Purdah and Other Poems*. deal with the various aspects of a Muslim woman's life where she experiences injustice, oppression and violence engineered through the culture of 'Purdah'. The main aim of this paper is to unfold how both above mentioned poetesses rebel against the restraints of society which are meant to exploit woman in the patriarchal society.

Keywords : Patriarchal society; injustice; violence; feminine sensibility; taboo.

Post Independence Indian English poetry has witnessed several tremendous developments. The rise of female poetic voice is the most crucial among them. Several new voices emerged on the poetic horizon with their sensibilities, asserting the attention of the world. Now, women poets boldly share their vision and their mission, their emotions and their aspirations through their writings. Of all Indian women poets writing in English, Kamala Das occupies the foremost position. She was born in Malabar on 31st March, 1934 and she was raised in her grandmother's house in Malabar which is in south India and also in Calcutta. She is known as one

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of the most powerful women writers of Indian writing and she also wrote in her native term which is Malayalam and her pen name was Madhavikutti. She wrote openly about female sexuality, gender ideas, desire in women and position of women specially in Indian context. "*Summer in Calcutta*" (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Play House and Other Poems* (1973), and *Yaa Allah* (2001) are her remarkable collections.

In 1999, she got converted to Islam which also raised a lot of controversy and that is again a sad irony because it became a question on women's agency as well. She was married at the age of fifteen and although she continued with her writing career, she had to make certain compromises because of which her writing became a metaphor of her experiences itself. We came to know a lot about Kamala Das later became Kamala Suraiyya from her autobiography "*My Story*". Her poem "An Introduction" is a very fitting example to understand her point of view with regards to her position, her ideas about herself and how she wants us to interpret her as a human being in the beginning of the poem. She talks not only about herself but also about her knowledge of politics. Why does she choose such a beginning because her poem was published in the first anthology which came out in the year 1965. It was called *Summer in Calcutta* and till then Indian politics was mostly or rather completely dominated by male figure. In 1966, the year after the publication of the book, the centre stage of Indian politics was taken by women figure, Indira Gandhi. so, Till then we did not have any prominent woman leader in the whole nation. Because this poem was published in 1965. It is understandable that politics was considered to be male-dominated. Kamala Das has written:

I don't know politics but I know the names
of those in power, and can repeat them like
days of week, or names of months,
beginning with Nehru. (*Summer in Calcutta*, 59)

Again, she is establishing her identity in terms of being an Indian. So, she is asserting the uniqueness of her identity, the skin colour and she is not ashamed of it. This was also a time, when there was a rise in feminist thought in European nations and in America also. So, she was trying to establish her indianness :

I am an Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages, write in
two, dream in one.
Why not let me speak in any language I like?
The language I Speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses,
All mine, mine alone. (59)

She writes about the critics which she is trying to make when it comes to language. She defines critics, friends, visiting cousins. Everybody has an opinion what a

woman should write, what a woman should think and what a woman should express in her writings or in her creativity. So, she directly tries to stop these opinion makers from giving her any cause which she is supposed to follow. So, she directly says, "why not leave me alone critics." (59)

Now, coming to Imtiaz Dharker, she is a powerful voice in modern Indian English poetry. Born in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1954 to Pakistan parents, she was a famous poet, critic and documentary filmmaker. She was awarded Queen's gold medal for her poetry. Her family moved to Glasgow when she was less than a year and she was brought up there. She considers herself a Scottish Muslim Calvinist. She is married to an Indian Hindu, Anil Dharker and India has become her permanent home. Her notable books of poetry are *Purdah* (1989), *Postcards from God* (1997), *I Speak for the Devil* (2001), *The Terrorist at my Table* (2006), *Living Fingerprints* ((2009), and *Over the Moon* (2014).

The overriding theme of her poetry is her acute concern for sex and gender inequality which characterise most of her poetry. The male dominated society in which women are terribly suppressed is keenly visible in most of her poetry. In the present poem, she brings to light the plight of the women in the context of a society governed by Islamic customs and traditions.

The poem "Purdah" vividly presents the conflict of a Muslim woman who has just attained her puberty. With her attainment of puberty the woman enters a world where she loses all her freedom. She is forced to wear purdah so as to cover her body and form. With this her alienation and suppression starts. The poem is indeed, a commentary on the evils of purdah system. It is an unjust religious practice that suppresses the dignity and freedom of the female sex. The woman loses her identity and everything in her life is determined by the males. The purdah system is most commonly prevalent in Muslim society although in certain parts of India the Hindu women also practise the system. However, this system is not in vogue among the liberal muslims.

Nevertheless, the system is strictly followed in many countries among the Muslims. Imtiaz was brought up in a traditional Muslim family in this poem, she opposes the practice. In fact, she questions its utility and objectives. It is believed that *purdah* will protect a woman from the prying eyes of a man. But in reality a woman cannot escape from the immoral gaze or glance of a man. The poet ironically says, *purdah* is a kind of safety. A woman under *purdah* feels more exposed and noticeable. If a woman can not escape the evil gaze of a man under purdah, it is clear that 'purdah system' is futile and irrelevant. The system only throws light on male chauvinism among the muslims.

The poem focuses on the helpless condition of the grown up Muslim girls who are supposed to follow certain fixed customs. As they grow up, it seems they are alive, but symbolically they lose their spirit of mind. They think *purdah*

can save them from the evil eyes of man. But, this is an illusion because *purdah* can by no means diminish their visibility :

One day they said
she was old enough to learn some shame.
She found it come quite naturally.
Purdah is a kind of safety.
The body finds a place to hide.
The cloth fans out against the skin
much like the earth that falls
on coffins after they put dead men in.
People she has known
stand up, sit down, as they have always done.
But they make different angles
in the light, their eyes aslant,
A little sly. (Purdah, 3)

Imtiaz Dharker, with her social and cultural growth and lived experiences spanning three countries - Pakistan, England and India-has shown her subtle artistry in exposing the “Purdah system” in her poem titled "Purdah" in all its complexes of theme and style. The symbolism inherent in *purdah* also finds its subtlety and simplicity in alien cultural setting.

Thus, in the light of foregoing discussion over the poetic creativity of these two poetess Kamala Das and Imtiaz Dharker, we find that the confessional poets deal in their poetry with personal emotional experiences which are generally taboo. There is ruthless self-analysis and tone of utter sincerity. The facts are not always true but there is no deviation at all from emotional truth. What a confessional poet gives us the “psychological equivalent “ that we always get in the poetry of Kamala Das and Imtiaz Dharker - Confessional poetry is a struggle to relate the private experience with the other world as it is.

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