

**EVE’S DISCOURSE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE POEMS OF
MAYA ANGELOU AND KAMALA DAS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE
TO SHORT STORIES OF ISMAT CHUGTAI**

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Abstract

Feminist literary criticism concerns itself with the gender politics and looks at the text and discourse within the society that produced it. The emphasis is certainly on the discrimination and neglect that the women folk encountered because of biological differences and the subsequent related effects. Feminist criticism developed from the women’s movement in the regions of Europe and North America in the 1960’s in the background of second wave of feminism. The catch line ‘the personal is political’, which transcends the boundary of personal into the realm of universal as well as having a socio-political significance, marks the work of later writers working on depicting the female experience on a more distinct level than their predecessors. The present study concentrates on the three representative and almost contemporary female writers Maya Angelou, Kamala Das and Ismat Chughtai from different backgrounds-language, culture and society, whose works reflect the same feminine experience that, remains unchanged despite the progress of civilization.

Keywords: Feminism, Culture, Society, Eve, Maya Angelou, Kamala Das, Ismat Chughtai.

Despite of the difference and diversity in field, milieu, language, medium and society, these three women writers of almost same period offer a close study in the field of the concept of gender, female and its relation with the greater world, that is the socio-political background that in the subsequent way create their own identity. Maya Angelou born April 4, 1928, is sometimes called ‘America’s renaissance woman’ because of her diverse genius that we prefer and are

habituated to get in a male. She is at once an author, poet, historian, songwriter, playwright, dancer, performer, singer, and civil rights activist. Opening her literary career with her series of semi autobiographical novels like: *'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing'* (1969), *'Gather Together in My Name'* (1974), *'The Heart of a Woman'* (1981), *'All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes'* (1986), deal with her various experiences ranging from her childhood to maturity, the exploitation of woman, the pangs, dilemmas, the physical atrocities that she has to suffer and went through double oppression- the experience of other, a double subaltern, first as a woman and secondly as a black. This theme also finds its expression in several of her poems. Her volumes of poetry are *'And Still I Rise'* (1987), *'I Shall Not Be Moved'* (1990), *'Shaker Why Don't You Sing?'* (1983), *'Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I diie'* (1971), etc and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and several other awards. The poems as a whole reveal a black woman's pride in its encounter with difficulties that life offers. In one of her lecture she said unhesitatingly, 'All my work is meant to say, you may encounter many defeats but you must not be defeated'. This remains the motto of her poems and her life.

The verse lines from the poem *'Men'* like:

“As men walked up and down
 The street, wino men, old men

 Men are always
 Going somewhere.
 They know I was here. Fifteen
 Years old and starving for them.”

Or
 ‘Your body has slammed shut, to renew
 No keys exist’
 Or
 ‘The hells we lived through
 And lived through still’

Have its own distinct pronunciation that women voice is easily recognized in the poem like *'Million Man March Poem'*, where traditional women identity is portrayed ironically in the lines like:

‘Courtesy into our bedroom
 Gentleness into our kitchen
 Care into our nursery’

Portray the mundane women's existence, imprisoned and shattered, being helpless by the traditional outer world that will surely give her no room to ply into. In the poem *'Phenomenal Woman'* she says:

‘I'm a woman
 Phenomenally
 Phenomenal woman
 That's me’
 Or
 the poem like *'Refusal'*

‘What surety is there
That we will meet again
In other worlds some
Future time undated’

It mocks and questions the brownian male version in ‘*The Last Ride Together*’ of ‘forever ride’ if the ‘world may end tonight’ where the lover hopes to meet again in the ‘world after death’. Angelou vehemently criticizes the domination of class system that subdues and exhorts its power on the poor and she appeals people to arise in action, both for themselves and for others. Throughout the period her voice becomes the representative voice of the downtrodden, helpless, victimized women of not only her continent but also throughout the whole of the world irrespective of caste, race and color. Angelou believes that women’s way of fighting have been based mostly on their terrible self-discipline, patience and meekness. Maya Angelou is great at getting one to understand what she is saying. She can make one feel, taste and hear her word, which every poet dreams of being able to do in all times and ages.

This distinct voice is as if repeated in our own Kamala Das, merging the identity and voyage of woman from the two continents.

“...and then my hunger for a
Particular touch waned
And one day I sent him some roses and slept
Through the night, a silent
Dreamless sleep and woke up in the morning free.”

Kamala das (1934-2009), undoubtedly overshadows the hitherto female voices that unveiled themselves and their progeny in the arena of Indian English literature. Her status as a producer of women’s text is acclaimed, fortified and respected also. Das’s poetry, soliloquy and monologues determine the post independence womanhood who are ready to unveil and yearns to set a footprint of their own. Das perhaps the best known woman poet in the post independence era wrote autobiographical novels, numerical essays on society, womanhood, culture, social ethics and a few short stories in the mother tongue Malayalam and some well-recognized, appreciated, accepted as well as hotly debated anthologies of poetry. Vrinda Nabar acknowledges her as the first Indo-English woman poet “to write convincingly of her femaleness.” In fact her poetry remains the unending monologues of self-conscious womanhood and celebration of her femaleness in the post independence India.

Even since the publication of her first anthology of poems, ‘*Summer in Calcutta*’ (1965), she has been regarded for her unflinching honest expression of that womanhood and female sexuality and role of woman in traditional Indian context which was still unheard. Das’s strength lies in the spontaneity with which she records ‘her most intimate responses’, an uninhibitedness which even now is more or less unique in the context of Indian society with her making private memories public.

Her volume of poems like ‘*Summer in Calcutta*’ [1965] published by the Everest press in New Delhi, second volume ‘*The Descendants*’ published by Writer’s Workshop, third volume ‘*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*’ published by orient Longman (1975), ‘*The Annamalai Poems*’ [1988], ‘*Only the Soul Knows How to Sing*’ [1996] published by DC books and her last collection ‘*Ya Allah*’ [2001] all more or less deals with the journey of her womanliness through ‘tireless waiting’ to someplace where she can pronounce and claim herself ‘I too call myself I’. It has been often claimed that das writes autobiographical sagas in an attempt to ‘mythologize’ her

personal life. She was sixteen when first of her three sons was born and at the age of eighteen, she was a mother and at the same time a disgruntled wife, de-romanticized in the married life. Das's somewhat unhappy marriage (her autobiography *'My Story'*, controversially describes her husband's homosexual liaison, emotional torture and neglect) makes her seek and speak of intensely personal experiences and her growth into a self-proclaimed womanhood. Her unsuccessful quest for love both in and outside the marriage bond with the frustration on the tradition bound society, that jointly compel her for a journey towards spiritual revelation, at least an attempt towards where love together with the connotation of bodily desire and sexual hunger merged, subdued and made one into a singled whole. Virginia Woolf, the noted British novelist and essayist was of the opinion that any woman in the profession of author is compelled to take two enterprises, two duties. The first is of course to kill the angel in the house and the second one was to tell the truth about her own experience as a body. She claims to have been successful in the first while failed in the second. Das is perhaps the only Indian writer in English to 'tread the untrodden challenging area exploring and sharing one's experience as a body'; by 'discarding the superficiality of other who try to grapple with the acute problems of their experience while avoiding any talk about their own specific bodies.' Thus while in the poem like *'An Introduction'*, that is an introduction of the post-independence Indian feminism thoroughly imbibed with western education and a desire to liberate herself, creating her own nation, traverses the whole area of womanhood, the ultimate genuine female experience like-

“...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.”

Das discloses the agony and anguish of woman body in sex, shrinking pitifully recognizing her inner self at once. The whirlpool of sex, nudity and the story of the 'sad woman body' being beaten behind the closed door is expulsed from the horizon and tranquility sets in her later poems. Das has accompanied this throughout her life. The ambiguous flickering of identity between love and sex appears, disappears and reappears throughout her poetic arena like a notional identity. The systematized soliloquies spear through;

“...his limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching out for me and the
Sad lie of my unending lust”

In the *'The Suicide,'* she expresses her frank desire to die when she is unable to find true love. She says;

“O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple.
I want to be beloved
And love is not to be had,
I want to be dead.”

These two specific voices of women join with Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991), who is the great dame of Urdu fiction and one of the representative writers of modern Urdu short story and narrative, with the others like being Manto, Krishan Chander and Rajinder Singh Bedi. As the indomitable spirit of Urdu afsana, the last chronicler of Uttar Pradesh Muslim culture and its associated semantic, she was a writer when women were discouraged from intellectual pursuits. She developed the markings of a feminist in the early forty when the concept of feminism was in its nascent stage. Many of Ismat's critics lament her single minded preoccupation of women's

lives with a middle class society and its concerns in the short stories like-‘*Badan Ki Xusbu*’ (The Scent of the Body) and ‘*Do Hath*’ (Two Hands), what they deem to be her myopic visions of the world but it is her forte also in an inclusive sense of the term. The influence of Dostoevsky, Maugham, was on her and she had a special fondness for Chekhov. Thus the western literary tradition and especially its realism have a major part to play in her works. Chughtai’s first short story ‘*Fasadi*’ (The Troublemaker) was published in Saqui literary magazine. ‘*Lihaf*’ (The Quilt) (1942) is considered to be one of the most controversial works ever produced by a woman writer in the subcontinent. A frustrated housewife, whose husband has no time for her, finds sexual gratification in a female servant, which is told from the view point of nine years old girl whose narration is without the burden of an adult female narrator. The symbolic expression of the adult narration finds a subtle touch in this story which serves as rather a shock to many especially for the readers for whom she has been written. Collection of short stories like ‘*Kalian*’ (Buds), ‘*Ek Bat*’ (A Word), ‘*Chui Mui*’ (Sensitive One), ‘*Xarid Lo!*’ (Buy!), ‘*Ek Quatra Xun*’ (A Drop of Blood) etc. and novels like ‘*Terbi Lakir*’ (The Crooked Line), ‘*Saudat*’ (The Madman) etc. and Ismat’s autobiography ‘*Kaghazi Hai Pairahan*’ also has similar effects like the autobiography of Kamala Das and Maya Angelou.

A clean portrayal of perpetuated abuse of women also occurs in the story, ‘*Scent of the Body*’ which concerns itself with the poverty of women who are forced to become maids in rich household to survive. The narrator dispassionately remarks, ‘the mahal tradition was that when cattle become heavy with calf, they were dispatched to the village. As soon as they were relieved of the calf and the milk started flowing they were summoned back. Maids received identical treatment. Pregnant were packed off to the villages.’

In ‘*The Rock*’, the main thematic thrust is a man who is immovable but takes ‘woman in the prime of their youth and discards them when his satisfaction in transferring them has ended.’ The author comments ‘Beautiful like the Sun god, romantic honey-eyed bhैया unmoving like rock-he sat smiling in the role of an immortalized martyr.

An old wave tired and broken lying in his feet.

A new wave bright and undulating was waiting to be clasped in his arm.’

The opinion that the autobiographical approach of writing and first person narrative technique help to bring into focus the search for self delineation through lifelines that manifests itself poetically into and through the bold assertion of selfhood. These three authors despite their specific differences of medium, race and nation create the re-portrayal of female history and its associated outlook that are identical in nature.

Latin American critic Naomi Lindstorm considers in this respect referring the influence of European mode of feminism as started by Simone de Beauvoir and the like of them, says that these writings drastically transformed and influenced women ‘by expressing profound dissatisfaction with the way in which our society apportions what is powerfully male and what female.’ This is true also of these writers. The habitual tradition of reader and the author write and think like the male is thoroughly challenged by these authors. Sex-role analysis and the debate of it assumed an important role in their works. The female identity is in perpetual state of crisis as the social image through which women are to establish their social identity is constantly being presented, analyzed and debated in their works. It becomes the saga of new Eves of the old Eden.

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