

KAMALA DAS'S "SUMMER IN CALCUTTA" AND *ÉCRITURE FÉMININE*

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Abstract

Labeled as a "feminist", Kamala Das's poem "Summer in Calcutta" illustrates an ecstatic mode of "feminine" writing in its depiction of the effects of the April sun at the poet's body. The caress of the sun generates a trance in the poet who discovers zones of hidden pleasure lying within her very body which have been rendered imperceptible by the legacy of patriarchy. The memory of her lover is momentarily erased from her mind at the instance she relishes on the "juice" of the sun. In representing the intensely private but exuberant emotion unleashed in the poet, the poem exemplifies Hélène Cixous's "theory" of *écriture féminine* which advocates "feminine" effect in writing and strives to rise beyond the hierarchical gender norms.

Keywords:- feminine, legacy of patriarchy, hierarchical.

The term "feminism" is difficult to theorize. To some it is a socio-political agenda against the oppression of men on women; to some resistance to patriarchal representation of women in culture; to some exemplary "feminine" way of living, and so on. The frequent arguments the "feminists" engage themselves in suggest the problematic nature of "feminism" which has produced a plethora of theoretical as well as creative writing labeled as "feminist" and/or "feminine". The tremendous traffic in discussions of feminism that the twentieth century has observed is captured in succinct phrases by Mary Eagleton:

Unsurprisingly, the millennium produced many feminist 'state of the discourse' addressed at conferences, in monographs, articles and special issues of journals. All trace a history, usually post-1968, and most recognize the force of two powerful emotions: a nostalgia for a past Golden Age of feminist collectivity and purpose, though such a period is invoked only to be immediately disputed, and a deep longing for a utopian future, though here too there are qualifications; the vision is rhetorical, a

spur to action rather than a blueprint for any lived political reality. Weighing up the gains and losses, what has been done and what still needs to be done, is a complex process, all the more so because one is often trying to work between a political philosophy and practice, changes in the 'common culture' and the specific impact that feminism has had in the academy and on knowledge production.

(Eagleton 1)

Apart from disputes in theory the domain of "feminist" creative writing too is flocked with diversified dissents that demand utmost caution from a critic before he embarks on interpretation. When asked by Eunice de Souza in an interview whether Kamala Das considered herself a "feminist" the latter replied: "Others see me as a feminist. I see myself as a feminine creature who loves the company of brilliant men and women. I am not very gender conscious" (De Souza, *Talking Poems* 32). It is hard to believe that Das is *not* gender conscious if we consider her poetic circumference echoed with radical feminist note. What is unmistakably present in Das is a frank confessional tone exposing the pangs of unsatisfied marriage, betrayal in love and affliction at the hand of Indian patriarchal culture.

The suffering resulting from gender discrimination which is an obvious result of traditional patriarchy made her select a path quite different from that of her poet mother. Her mother, says Das in the same interview, "wrote of a mother's all-consuming love for her children. The women in her poetry called their husbands 'master'. [...] I sensed the hypocrisy so evident in my parents' marriage and decided never to emulate them. Although my mother wrote incessantly of her happy marriage, I heard her quarrel with my father every night" (De Souza, *Talking Poems* 30-31). Das attempted to break away not only from the kind of verse her mother composed but from the lifestyle she led. Instead of writing the previous women's poetry of a beautiful nature, blessed marriage and romantic melancholy she built her own canon throbbing with life and vitality. Her poetry is intensely personal. She did not hesitate to portray her frustration with marriage and sexual adventures outside marriage which left her more desolate.

Das's poem 'Summer in Calcutta' is a passionate poem revolving around the private space of the poet in moments of living with herself. It presents some exquisite images while describing her delight at the warmth of the April sun. The "defamiliarized" presentation of the sun and sunrays adds special charm to the poem. The poet imagines the sun to be an orange which is squeezed in her glass to prepare a delicious juice which she sips in lazy contentment:

What is this drink but
The April sun, squeezed
Like an orange in
My glass? I sip the
Fire, I drink and drink
Again, I am drunk,
Yes, but on the gold
Of suns.

(Das, 'Summer in Calcutta')

The poet gets intoxicated as the "noble venom" flows through her veins. She talks about the reaction her body makes with the touch of the April sun. As the sunrays play at her body she

enjoys the mild cuddle of the sun which reduces her worries. It is essentially a female experience—the suppressed desire of the poet leaps forth at the caress of the vigorous sun. In illustrating the passionate account of the poet’s delight, the poem becomes a specimen of zealous mode of “feminine” writing. The poem invites a provocative assessment of its success as exemplification of Hélène Cixous’ formulation of the *écriture féminine* which emphasizes not the gender of the writer but the “writing-effect” of the text. In this “theory”, the preoccupation of a critic is to examine how far a text achieves its success to *be* “feminine”. But Cixous is not simply concerned with developing a “theory” since “It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist” (Cixous 883). Although Cixous denies calling *écriture féminine* a “theory” it is, to a certain extent, a new beginning, if not an altogether utopian project. *Écriture féminine* ceases to be a mere paradigm of literary interpretation but an effective tool of creative writing. Writing is always imperative to Cixous and her contemporary French feminists who “called for a revolution in theory in which women would be the principal actors and authors, a revolution in which the traditional divide between theory and practice would be effaced in the act of writing” (Weil 155).

Cixous’s works show obvious influence of the poststructuralist thinkers like Derrida and Lacan both of whose work on the concept of language illustrates, although in an indirect way, language’s denigration of woman. In her manifesto of *écriture féminine*, the essay ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ pledges women to put their bodies into writing:

Write yourself. Your bodies must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. [...] To write. An act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being "too hot"; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing ...)—tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvelous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak.

(Cixous 880)

A major characteristic of French feminism is its belief that woman’s libidinal desire is oppressed and repressed by patriarchy. A recuperation of the suppressed desire in linguistic terms is a difficult endeavour because language itself is a patriarchal construct. The subversive strategy that Kamala Das adopts in her poem is manifested in the disruptive jerks her short broken lines produce. The juxtaposing of two very different words—“gold” and “venom”—that describes the same “juice” of the April sun creates a striking effect. The linguistic conflict brings out in analogy the mixed feeling of pleasure and pain working simultaneously in the poet. The next phrase, “bride’s nervous smile”, which insinuates at the grim prospect of an Indian woman who is more nervous than happy at the eve of her first night with her husband, completes the

circle of traumatized desire previously evoked. The eruption of suppressed desire takes the form of insubstantial “bubbles” which, however, “meet” her lips:

Wee bubbles ring
 My glass, like a bride’s
 Nervous smile, and meet
 My lips.

(Das, “Summer in Calcutta”)

The deeply passionate description of the poet’s gustatory and tactile sensations in the poem envisages a possible release of libidinal voices that the patriarchal machinery diminishes to the extent of inaudibility. The description bears testimony to the fact that the same language which, according to Lacan psychoanalysis, is patriarchy’s “primary tool of subjection, writing even our unconscious” (Weil 158) ingrains at the same time possibilities of subversion. The trance that the “drink” produces in the poet blurs her lover from her memory. The warmth of the sun is so pleasing that the poet is lulled to forgetfulness. The memory of her lover gets blurred from her mind:

How
 Brief the term of my
 Devotion, how brief
 Your reign when I with
 Glass in hand, drink, drink,
 And drink again this
 Juice of April suns.

(Das, “Summer in Calcutta”)

Cixous considers female imagination infinite in range and beautiful in poetic manifestation; the truly liberated woman writer of Cixous’s imagination cries out: “I [...] overflow; my desires have invented new desire, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I [...] have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst—burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune” (Cixous 876). The “liberated” poet in “Summer in Calcutta” listens to the previously unheard song of her female body. Women in Indian culture (in fact, in all cultures) are taught to find their fulfilment with their husband as if they do not have any separate existence or essence. But once the barrier of stigma between ‘do’ and ‘don’t’ becomes faint, the horizon of female experience is widened to the infinity. The poet is rendered in trance at the warm touch of the April sun. Her body discovers new regions of pleasure; the strings of her body are now plucked by the April sun which liberates the abundant music previously held suppressed within her corporeal frame.

It is the poet’s engagement with the April sun that helps her find out the way to the previously unknown realm of pleasure. She can now boldly defy male participation at the moment of discovering the zones of pleasure which reside within her very body. She enjoys it through every pores of her female body. It opens countless ways for her to discover regions of delight. The sun acts as a kind of initiator in making her aware of it; and when this stage is over, not only does the poet sip the sun’s quizzed juice but also the sun releases the sap of her female desire held censored for long. She is successful in achieving *jouissance* (roughly translated as “orgasm”) which in literary theory representing “an intensity which, like woman’s pleasure, is

outside language” (Weil 153). The chains of language are finally broken in linguistic insurrection devised by the poet.

The poem is built around an order of binary opposites, which becomes Das’s concern to unbuild here. The binary-sets like beloved and lover, warmth and coldness, loving and losing, laughter and nervousness are evoked in the performance of the text. Deconstruction considers these binary oppositions hierarchical, i.e., one term in the pair is always privileged, or considered superior to the other, e.g., (male) lover is superior to (female) beloved. The poem, delved deep into the politics of patriarchal ideology, traces out and destroys the hierarchy of binary-sets. In doing so it does not only advocate the pleasure of the woman and banish the lover from her moment of ecstasy, but also dislocate linguistic axioms. This is the power of writing that Cixous talks about through which “different modes of personal, economic and social intersubjective relationships can be realised—modes that do not insist upon an oppositional structure which invokes hierarchy and domination, and ultimately denies difference—but one which is open and seeks to embrace rather than to appropriate the other” (Dobson 125).

Carol Rumens has pointed out an interesting fact that Das, who is a bilingual writer, nevertheless, “uses both Malayalam and English for her fiction, but English for her poetry” (qtd. in De Souza, *Nine Indian Women Poets* 8). English becomes her “naturalized” medium of expression which can be viewed as entailing with it the deconstructive legacy of unsettling the hierarchy of logocentric primacy of speech over writing. Derrida points out the hierarchical binary-set of speech/writing which is, however, not the only existence in his list. In the words of Hobson: “As with speech and writing, each set of oppositions claims to be a pair, but is in fact a hierarchy; each is out of kilter, and for each one Derrida will show what are the consequences of this disparity” (Hobson 13). The consequence in the present context of Das is the academic antagonism Das faced as the aftermath of her writing in a “queer” style of writing in “half English, half / Indian, funny perhaps” language (Das, “An Introduction” 10). Das’s is poetry of resistance against the snobbish culture and its chief virtue is honesty and simplicity. Her poetry has unique qualities that inspired a whole new generation of poets, as De Souza observes:

Women writers owe a special debt to Kamala Das. She mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms. Whatever her vernacular oddities, she has spread us the colonial cringe. She has spread us what in some circles, nativist and expatriate, is still considered mandatory: the politically correct ‘anguish’ of writing in English.

(De Souza, *Nine Indian Women Poets* 8).

Yet Das qualifies as an Indian poet writing in English whose hybrid “queer” English is again another subversive jolt at the citadel of Queen’s English. Cixous praises the Avant-Garde artists, like James Joyce, whose rebellious style she finds contiguous to *écriture féminine*. Cixous’ idea of “feminine writing”, with its inclination towards unsettling the established linguistic tradition which is fundamentally a patriarchal construct, provides a space of exemplification to Das’s passionate female experience exclusively in “feminine” terms. The wicked zone of the “normative” is dislocated as the woman squeezes the Sun of patriarchal vigour into her glass and drinks it at ease. Contrary to the notion of woman’s pleasure dependent on male participation, the poet enjoys the bliss of nature without the minimal need of her lover. In her audacious accomplishment the poet unsettles the codes of conduct and becomes a “liberated” woman as well as a “liberated” writer. Entailing the poet’s desire, now pulsating with

the rhythms of Nature, the poem implies a return to pre-civilization time, before language was polluted by dominant ideologies of patriarchy. The poet's frank confession of her forgetfulness of her lover at the time of her intimate sensation escorts the poem towards an essentially feminine discourse in which the patriarchal ideologies of language are avoided, if not totally destroyed. The poem thus shows the immense possibility of "feminine" mode of writing "through experimental poetics" (Weil 169) which is still not widespread in the literary nexus of India.

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