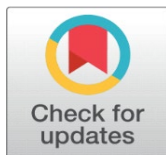
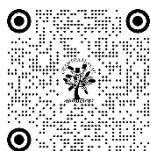


THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS AND SYLVIA PLATH

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ABSTRACT

The word 'Image' has one or two or both meanings: one, as the character of a thing or person as received by the public, two, a mental representation, idea or conception. The application of this term can be either literal or figurative, but when conjoined with literature it can be both.

The broadly general image of women in literature identifies the real status accorded to woman in society- as mother, wife, daughter, in that order in a familial setting. Outside it, she is the prostitute, the widow, the companion etc. In more modern times she is accepted as a professional, but when she protests against injustice and exploitation she is grudgingly termed activist and seen as rebel or deviant.

1. INTRODUCTION

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Human nature being more or less the same all over the world, its reflection in different literatures is bound to have similarities. As writers derive their inspiration from the same source which is life itself, and face the same experience, emotional and intellectual, there is bound to be a unity of outlook in their works. This paper attempts a study of two famous women poets Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath.

Kamala Das was born in 1934 in Punnayurkulam in South. Malabar and Sylvia Plath in 1932 in Boston. Both have written poetry replete with autobiographical details. It will be worthwhile to study their poems to find out what similarities and differences exist in their ways of thinking as reflected in their poems.

In the society to which Kamala Das belongs it was impossible for a woman to rebel against the man, against a male's sense of superiority because the male almost occupied the position of a God. Das felt that woman has always belonged to the deprived categories of human. This kind of gender arrangement must have disturbed her like anything. She realized that woman is not a slave and she has every right to seek freedom. Das wrote about the woman who suffers in society. Almost all her works show her concern for the social and cultural construction of gender, raising her protest against marginalization and exploitation of women. The poem "An Introduction" has variously been interpreted as intensely autobiographical and the poet's aesthetic manifesto. The poem is an attempt to assert poet's individuality and feminine identity against social and cultural conformity.

In her poem "The Old Playhouse" also she talks about a male dominated society where women become a mere dwarf. The poem shows that her exploration into the nature of lust and disillusionment is not merely confined to the exposure of the male personality but also, into her ownself.

You called me wife
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamin. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf.

(The Old Playhouse, L 12-16)

In the poem "Composition" Das narrates "ordinary events of an ordinary life". Man's attitude to woman in the society is very much a point throughout the poem. Women are deprived of freedom before and after they get married and the following lines stem from this attitude:

When I got married
My husband said,
You may have freedom
as much as you want.
Composition, L 54-57)
Later she says that all women are alike.
We are all alike,
We women,
In our wrappings of hairless skin.
(Composition, L 119-121)

In the same poem she argues for equality between man and woman:

Husbands and wives,
Here is my advice to you,
Obey each other's crazy
commands,
Ignore the sane.
(Composition, L 189-192)

She becomes aware of the fact that freedom was only an escape from the consciousness of sexual incompetence and subjected heterosexuality.

Further the unhappy woman makes her appearance in "The Suicide". The picture is that of an unhappy woman enacting the role of a happy woman:

I must pose,
I must pretend,
I must act the role
Of happy woman

Happy wife.

(The Suicide, L. 41-45)

In poems like "The Invitation" and "The Looking Glass" one gets the impression that man becomes indispensable for a young woman. Essentially the poems are about man-woman relationship, love and lust but there is an irony to flatter the male ego. According to the famous Malayalam poet Satchidanandan, "Kamala Das's poetry has her autobiography written into it. She is not any woman or the incarnation of "essential womanhood" if at all there is one she is an Indian poet, writing in English when Indian poetry in English is breaking free from the rhetorical and romantic traditions when her male counterparts like Nissin Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan are struggling hard to form a dense, pithy and ironic idiom in their poems and Jayanta Mahapatra is trying to relate his poetry to his immediate environment with pain and anger."

Kamala Das takes a rather independent view of things and never wants to idealize woman. Sometimes her women celebrate love outside marriage, and some other times they suffer from the simple reason that they are women. Most of the time women in her poems challenge the established norms of the society and assert themselves. She advocates freedom for woman on the one hand and chooses to laugh at those who claim themselves to be feminists on the other. Dss's attitude can be certainly be described as one of ambivalence. As Kaur says, "Kamala Das's name tops the list of the writers who have shown serious concern with the depiction of women in literature and have expressed restlessness with the traditional positioning of women"".

American society has always been considered more advanced as compared to Indian society. Kamala Das's poems are quite similar to her highly educated American counterpart who lived in a so-called "advanced society". Sylvia Plath like Kamala Das seems to have a fascination for the old way of life in which women performed the traditional roles of the house wife, mother and grandmother to perfection. They expect their mothers to behave in a similar fashion but when they themselves are expected to play the same roles they feel frustrated and trapped.

Plath is concerned not only about her own self body and mind, but also all those who are suppressed by the powerful elements in the world. In "Daddy" she identifies with the Jews driven to concentration camps by the Nazis, while in "Lady Lazarus" she talks about the physical exploitation of women in the world. Plath finds women reduced to the status of a body in a world ruled by men. Das accepts her dependence on men for mental and sexual satisfaction but Plath revolts against it. She even contemplates homosexuality as an alternative to marriage. Plath projects herself not only a woman but also as an individual demanding her right to live life the way she wants. She is angry with the society for trying to bind her through customs and traditions or just attitudes. At times she feels vulnerable and helpless.

The duties of the lady mentioned in Plath's poems are also analogous with those of the lady in Kamala Das's verse. Tea-cups emerge in both the poems as symbol of corrosion. Plath's lady can also do mechanized roles: "It can sew, it can cook/It can talk, talk, talk" and serve the man in a number of ways. Plath laments the loss of personality in her husband's home:

Here is a hand
To fill it and willing
To bring tea-cups and roll away
Headaches
And do whatever you tell it
(Ariel, P-14)

We note that in both the Poets there is a caricature of the role of wife and consequent reduction of personality. Like Das, Plath is also aware that "Man" is assertive and exploits woman.

Naturally an endeavor to live with man is bound to end in loss of freedom and frustration. Domesticity according to Plath means measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus and adhering the rules. In "Winter Trees" she compares the trees beyond her window to women and finds that the trees have a comfort stability which the women lack. The poem sketches the agonies and complications of women which Plath experienced in her real lifelike Das. She writes.

Memories growing, ring on ring
A Series of weddings.
Knowing neither abortions nor bitchery

Truer than. Women,
They seed so effortlessly.
(Winter trees, P-11)

For Das also there is no coming back for the women, no recovering from the lost state. The woman has to accept the present unquestioningly as if it were her preordained fate. But for Plath women are fully aware of their own potential, do not lack self-esteem, know their world and are not ready to accept defeat. According to her women can also be revengeful. In poems like "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" she warns men against women. Infact she advises every woman to be prepared to face life without "Mr. Right."

Plath never gives us the impression of being the battered woman reading under the burden of her womanhood. She searches for a place in this world not as a woman but as an individual. She felt that the society trained her to think like an individual but expected her to live as an individual. Life for Das is less of a challenge as compared to Plath. Her enemies are those who do not allow her to enjoy what has been socially sanctioned for women.

Plath is at odds with several factors at one and the same time. Her enemies are both real and imaginary. Her sharp intelligence and outstanding academic career make her more vulnerable. Das has managed to survive in a closed, tradition bound society. While Plath succumbed to the tension of trying to be a woman and individual at the same time though she belonged to a free and advanced society.

Thus we see that the image of woman in literature has concerned itself with following the transition of a woman from the domestic fold to an individual status of holding herself responsible for her own intellectual and emotional fulfilment. One marks the women breaking out of these earlier stereotypes, a paradigm consisting of women who are not just images but people of flesh and blood who do not take after or lead to other stereotypes. These women act out their lives not as protestors or activists with a consciously held world view but out of inner private compulsions.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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