An Ecofeminist Reading of Kamala Das’s Poetry

V. Anitha, Ph.D, Research Scholar, Arignar Anna College (Arts & Science) Krishnagiri, Tamilnadu, India.

Dr.K. Anand, Assistant Professor & Research PG & Research Department of English Supervisor Arignar Anna College (Arts & Science), India Krishnagiri, Tamilnadu, India

Abstract

An attempt to read Kamala Das’s poetry from an ecofeminist point of view pass through new grounds and helps to endow with new insights into hitherto uncultivated regions in her poetic world such as the connections between the human and non-human world of her poetry, her celebration of the body, and male-female dichotomies. This paper explores to draw conventional hierarchies through her poetic voices and placing her poetic personality within biological environment which make her poetic output as ecofeminist.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Nature, Memories, Love & Environment

The poetry of kamala Das draws without a second thought from her matrilineal heritage the land, the environment as well as the poetic personae and the personal voice. She is able to absorb the seeming contradictions into a composite picture. She is deeply concerned with the social situation of women, and how their physical bodies have been reduced to being mere commodities to products for general consumption. Women held little space in a social system that was solely the male world. Nevertheless, in her poetry one can also find an admiration of the intrinsic value of everything in nature and respect for the natural, a biocentrism rather anthropocentric approach to the natural world.

Descriptions of nature and the outer world have always been abundant in Indian English poetry. Among the women writers, the voices of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu’s nature poetry are highly appreciable. It was only with the publication of the poetry of kamala Das that Indian poetry took an extremely solemn personal tone, a self impulsive language and earned an outstanding place among world poetry in English.
The elegiac utterances of Kamala das have a very personal note. The chief protagonist of her poems is herself. She makes no endeavor to be objective and scientific although her descriptions are exact, precise and moderately comprehensive in their content. She is obviously objective in her approach and makes no attempt to rationalize her emotions and feelings. Yet she does not really sentimentalize the identity. In one of her earlier poems *Composition* she writes that:

```
By peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul and
...
What I narrate are the ordinary
Events of an
Ordinary life.
```

Yet as poet she transfers the commonplace of the everyday life into something splendorous. The ordinary events of her personal life encompass the corpus of her poetic worlds. She is able to renovate the personal into the political in a very unique manner using a very subjective tone. In her poetry the private world of her self is politicized giving candid expression to the full range of female experience. In many of her poems, Kamala Das reverts to the world of her everyday life. She has been taught as:

```
Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife they said. Be embroider, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants…Don’t sit
On walls or peep in though our –draped windows
Be Amy or be Kamala. Or better still be Madhavkutty.
It is time to
Choose a name a role. Don’t play pretend games (35-42)
```

She is unswerving and frank in her poems. Her poetic personae are located in the Indian context with all it colonial complexities. In her poem, *An Introduction* she introduces herself as:

```
I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages write in
Two, dream in one. (4-6)
```
She prefers to keep to her own decisions and explains her poetic standpoint in the poem where she demands boldness in her decision:

Why let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. (10-13)

Stray incidents from her early days, her school days, and her teenage fantasies, her marital and extramarital exploits-imaginary or otherwise, her family life, her relatives, her grandmother are some other major themes in her poetry. Her grandmother and the matrilineal home in which she lived are living personae in her poems. They presuppose a living quality, mixing memory with yearning, to experience again a precedent now gone astray to her. In her poem *My Grandmother’s House* she describes the house and her love towards the same as:

There is a house now far away where once
I received love…that woman died,
The house withdrew into silence, snake moved
Among books I was then too young (32).

The house becomes a part of her past and the qualities of adore and affection she associates with her grandmother make it a living entity with a capacity to love that she cannot find in her urban present. Here the personal of her self with a personal history becomes amalgamated with her poetic subject. Her matrilineal home from which, she was relocated by marriage, becomes the spirit of youth and she sees herself as a lost wanderer disinherited from her matrilineal past pleading at strangers’ doors now for her lost inheritance of love.

The landscapes of the land wherein the poems are located become an inevitable and essential part of her poetry. Her matrilineal home, the tharavad appears in most of her poems. An appealing feature with regard to the tharavad, is the life style practices wherein the natural milieu extends into the house. There is a pond attached to every house as well as a large natural garden wherein a space is chosen to the worship of the elements and the non human creatures are allowed for safe place of protection from human turmoil. They are not only left unscathed where shrubs and trees are allowed to grow undomesticated and the natural habitat is left without interruption. The house itself is a marvel that allows for natural airing with large spaces within
open to the sky and low sloping roofs that are ecological and suitable to the local climate conditions. It is therefore only evitable that poet extends those eco-friendly approaches to her poetic subject matter. She speaks of her love of swimming which ‘comes naturally to me’ and the opportunities she had in the tharavad to indulge her passion:

I had a house in Malabar
I did all my growing there
In the bright summer months.
I swam about and floated
And dived into the cold and green and gold
In all the house of sun
Until
My grandmother cried
Darling you must stop this bathing now (65-73)

Here the sensual pleasure of swimming in the green pool with its entire visual spectacle ends unexpectedly when she is made conscious of the growth of her body and her transformation into a young woman. The structure of the poem with its uneven rhythms broken at that stage reflects the break in her emotional response as well. The unexpected awareness of her growing body, which is a culturally imposed one and its implications are reflected through a discontinuity from the natural world around her.

Love is the foremost obsession in the poetry of Kamala Das. She mourns for the loss of innocence and the forfeiting of relationships based on in several of her poems. Yet it is the physical and sexual oppression of love in her poems that has attracted much critical attention. Her obvious descriptions of the human body and the intrinsic sexuality of male-female relationships have brought her much unwarranted criticism:

Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the must of sweat between the breasts
The warm shock of menstrual blood and all your
Endless female hungers (12-16)
The significance of celebrating the body is decorated by many of ecofeminist writers. In the poetry of kamala Das both the male and female body are explored and distinguished. Her poetic voice reflects ecofeminist qualities when in the same poem for instance the female persona advises the reader

Admit you
Admiration, Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor
Drooping towels (6-10)

But her approach to male female relation is not merely physical or dualistic. The mind of the soul is as important as the body as she makes clear in the poem like Suicide where she states that:

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare (1-4)

Both her body and her mind are the subject matter of her poetic utterances. She is unambiguous and unabashed about her inner longings and her physical sexual hungers in her poems. The persona of her poetry would then need a body as well as the spirit and the environment that supports the whole to reflect her holistic vision. At other instances she would rather look at the spirituality of the emotions by sublimating them as in the Radha –Krishna poems. In her poem Substitute for instance the narrator says that:

Yes I was thinking lying beside him
That I was loved, and was much loved
It is a physical thing

Love therefore was not to be seen in merely physical terms, yet there was to be no refutation of the body or its sensuality in her poetic voice. Here lies her exclusive position for the female voice in modern Indian poetry in English. She has been referred to as a feminist though she herself is unsure of the appropriateness of the label. Kamala das has no hesitation in placing herself among the world of the hoe with its familial rights and duties. For her, the world of her home is in permanence with her public self. She does not look at them as binary oppositions.
The surroundings around the personae of her poetry are very much a part of their selves or herself. At times the outer space is in compassionate union with the inner self of the personae. At other times there is no marked understanding. She does not romanticize the land or its many manifestations or does she estrange herself from it. The environment of the poetry is never in direct confrontation with the speaker for example, when she speaks about lord Krishna:

Ghanshyam
You have like a koel built your
Nest in the harbour of my
Heart
My life until now a sleeping jungle
Is at last astir with
Music (18)

Here the name Gnanshyam is the pseudonyms of the Lord Krishna. The name may be translated as the dark one heavy like the dusk or the dark cloud that heralds rain. The lover is equated to a phenomenon of nature the dark cloud heralding rain, the raindrops of course symbolizing fertility. Here in the self and the other the lover and his love become one with the natural phenomenon around the poetic persona. But despite its preoccupation with the self, it deals with the outer world and the natural phenomenon with respect and a certain sense of empathy. The human world is co-terminus with the non-human schemata. The birds, the animals, the trees, the storm and the rain are as much a part of her inner world as her emotions and opinions.

In the final analysis of Kamala Das’s poetry, her poetry is steeped into environmental concerns. In fact Kamala’s self becomes the ecological self though her poetic voice she was able to commemorate experience of being woman without admission of guilt or embarrassment. Through her poetic look one can have a an assortment of oppositions like male-female, nature-culture and human-non-human and is above to arrive at an integrated and composite picture rather than a broken or discontinuous one. She does not polish over differences or pay no attention to them but tries to look at them with a compassion that is non-dualistic and holistic. While Kamala Das looks at these dichotomies, she is extremely aware of the dependency existent in heterosexual relations their interdependent and hierarchal relationships as well as
their need for distinctiveness and separateness. In theme and oeuvre, the poetry of Kamala Das lends itself to ecofeminist readings.

Works Cited: