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Society and the Self: A comparative analysis of the poetry of Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam

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Abstract: This research paper presents a comparative analysis of the poetry of two renowned women writers who stood out as iconoclasts in Indian literary landscape: Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam. Although hailed from the distinct socio cultural backgrounds, they offered rich insights into the complexities of womanhood within patriarchal set ups. By questioning the issues of gender identity, sexuality and female subjugation, they made a radical departure from the main-stream literary tradition. This comparative study aims to shed light on the ways in which Das and Pritam challenge patriarchal norms in a similar yet distinct style of their own. Hence, this analysis hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of feminist discourse within Indian literature and highlights the relevance of these poets in contemporary conversations on gender and power dynamics.

Keywords: Comparative Analysis, Feminism, Patriarchy, Self-identity, Women Poets

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INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of civilization, women have been considered inferior to men in both physical structure and intellectual ability. This belief stems from the story of creation, where Adam was created first and Eve was made from his rib to serve as his companion. The characteristics of these two creations of God have always been portrayed as inherently different, with men being depicted as stronger than women. Hence, throughout history, women have been marginalized and projected as the weaker sex within patriarchal societies. These social constructs have rather been generated by the gender biases of civilization. As rightly put forward by De Beauvoir (1988), 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature' (p. 295).

Unfortunately same has been the attitude towards women in Indian cultural set up where patriarchy has strong roots too. History is replete with examples where women have been subjected to male- dominance: be it familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, cultural and artistic arena. It is the experience of subordination that cripples a woman's self- respect, self-esteem, self-confidence and makes her feel discriminated, insulted, controlled, exploited and oppressed.

Among the other fields, discrimination against women on the literary front is no exception. Time and again one comes across various writers who have

presented female characters and stories about women from their own perspective. Hence, presenting femininity with submission and male authority. But the tables began to turn with some bold women writers who shook the very foundation of male chauvinism by their explicit attacks through the medium of pen and paper. They were the ones who attempted to redefine the position of women in their own respective ways. The poetry of two such women poets of the mid-20th century: Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam is under analysis in this research paper. Although they hailed from the different socio cultural backgrounds, they registered a strong protest against the patriarchal social norms, thereby representing a radical departure from the main-stream literary tradition. Both poets challenged societal norms and gave voice to the experiences of women in India, albeit in distinct ways. While Das's poetry is more confessional and personal, Pritam's work often addressed rather broader social issues though looking through the feminist lens only. Yet, both share a common thread of courage and honesty in their writing, making them significant figures in Indian literature. Their poetry is renowned for the defiance of social norms, particularly regarding gender roles and societal expectations placed on women.

Kamala Das alias Kamala Surayya alias Madhavikutty borrowed the legacy of writing from her father who was a well-known Malayalam literary figure of his times. Her poetic genius brought her many accolades including PEN Asian Poetry Prize and Sahitya Academy Award. Although she was born in an upper-caste Hindu community in Kerala, the conservative culture of South Indian society posed limitations on her

freedom of expression and autonomy. Her poetry reflects her struggle against those expectations, patriarchal norms and her search for personal and sexual liberation. She boldly addressed topics such as female desire and the female body, challenging societal taboos that sought to silence women's voices. The raw honesty of her personal life reflecting her marital conflicts makes her poetry as a means of self-exploration, self-expression, and catharsis, inviting readers into the inner workings of her mind and heart.

On the other hand, Amrita Pritam too was born in a family of well-educated parents with her mother as a school teacher and her father as a Punjabi poet. But it was the death of her mother when she was only 11 that influenced her literary career as much as was the influence of partition. Trapped in loneliness following her mother's death, she began to write at an early age. Her first anthology of poems, 'Amrit Lehan' (Immortal Waves) was published in 1936, at the age of sixteen, the year she married Pritam Singh, an editor to whom she was engaged in early childhood, and changed her name from Amrit Kaur to Amrita Pritam. Thereafter the pangs of partition made her write a poignant yet excellent piece of verse 'Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu' (Today I invoke Waris Shah) which is an expression of her anguish over massacres during the partition of India. Her poetry often reflects the pain, the sense of displacement, and the search for belonging and identity with special focus on women in the aftermath of the partition. Being associated with the Progressive Writers' Movement, a literary movement that aimed to use literature as a tool for social change, Amrita's poetry reflected her experiences as a woman in a patriarchal society. She challenged traditional gender roles assigned to women by giving voice to their experiences, desires, and aspirations through her writing. Hence, Amrita Pritam's socio-cultural background profoundly influenced her identity as a poet and the themes underlined in her poetry. She, due to her literary genius, became the first woman recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1956 and won many accolades including India's second highest civilian award The Padma Vibhushan.

Despite differing socio-cultural backgrounds, the study argues that there is significant amount of similarity in the treatment of feminist themes in the writings of these two women poets.

Defying the Social Norms

Writing in the times when women expressing their desires were killed in the name of honour, both the women writers showed the audacity to articulate their feelings that still echoes not only in their respective regions, but across India and beyond. In fact the very lives they lived were unconventional, they lived as rebels defying the societal norms at every point of their lives. Challenging the institution of marriage in their personal lives, they rebelled against the conventions, traditions and accepted norms of society. Both the poets made

poetry a vehicle for the expression of their resentments against male domination over women.

Echoing the unspoken experiences of many women around her, Kamala Das presented the trauma of sexuality that came with an arrangement of marriage. In such alliance, she said a woman is reduced to a "trained circus dog" where her soul and spirit got crushed. Refused to being exploited for merely her husband's sexual gratification who showed her no true love or compassion, Kamala Das ended her marriage in divorce. A strong tone of protest can be observed in many of her poems as she asserts in 'Of Calcutta':

*"Here in my husband's home, I am a trained circus dog
Jumping my routine hoops each day, where is my soul,
My spirit, where the muted tongue of my desire?"*

Pritam's ability to challenge societal norms can also be better understood by examining the themes prevalent in her poetry. Her writings often focused on topics considered controversial at the time, including extramarital relationships, divorce, and single motherhood. Through these themes, she courageously defied social expectations placed upon women and shed light on their struggles within patriarchal structures. This audacity allowed readers to question prevailing notions about morality and understand the complexities of human relationships beyond conventional boundaries. She wrote openly of sexuality and desire in a society where such topics were taboo. Even allusions to sexual yearnings, such as ones in the poem 'Apne Naal Mulaqat' (Meeting the Self) below, would be considered obscene.

*"My bed is ready for you
But take off your body
Like you did with your shirt and shoes
Keep it away on the stool
It doesn't matter
Every land has its own customs."*

Hence, both the writers confronted societal norms and expectations, challenging the constraints imposed by gender roles, patriarchy, and social conventions. Nothing deterred them to express revolutionary ideas. Some of their contemporary critics described them as feminists much before feminism.

In the Quest of Self

Through their poetry, Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam set off on a journey of self-discovery and self-affirmation. While dealing with the questions of identity in its various dimensions, their verses resonated with the need for personal identity. Winners of many literary accolades at the National and International platforms, both the poets started by questioning the pitiable positions that were granted to women.

In an attempt to redefine the space for women in society, Kamala Das asserted in her poem – ‘The Introduction’

“Dress in sarees, be girl Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook, Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh, Belong, cried the categorizers”

Apparently, one notices the expectations the society has from a woman. She is supposed to ‘fit in’ always, by playing the domestic roles that are assigned to her. The institution of marriage gives her a title of a ‘wife’, forces her to accept the ways and orders of her male counterparts and thus leads to the loss of her own identity.

She wrote in her poem ‘Old Playhouse’:

*“You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
Questions I mumbled incoherent replies.”*

Expressing her views about Kamala, Sunanda P.Chavan (1984) wrote, “Kamala Das embodies the most significant stage of development of Indian Feminine poetic sensibility not yet reached by her contemporaries.” (p. 60)

Something quiet similar was underscored by Amrita Pritam in her poem ‘Kunwari’ (The Virgin)

*“Oh, God!
Was the bridal chamber so dark that I could not tell the
one I had slain from the one I did, in fact, kill.”*

Talking assertively about the violence of sexual and self-annihilation, Amrita in her assertive feministic tone, underpins the killing of a girl’s dreams and identity as soon as she loses her virginity. By exploring the uncommon subjects of her time like, sexual and psychological exploitation in marriages, she succeeds in projecting the helplessness of a woman when she is forced to indulge in sexual act under the ritual and tradition of marriage. However, the tone exudes conviction and wisdom, underscoring the narrator’s steadfastness.

Stating her feelings in an interview to Coppola (1965), Amrita talked about prejudice against women in the literary world.

“Men take women’s writing lightly; they doubt a women’s sincerity. For example, when I got Sahitya Akademi Award, and with it fame, the leading English daily in Delhi wrote that I got my popularity in Punjabi literature because of my youth and beauty. I felt very sorry to read that. Why not talent? They can admire a beautiful woman, but not a talented one.” (p.11)

Here Pritam observed that while her male contemporaries were lauded for their literary accomplishments, privileged, and praised publicly for their lyrical brilliance, she, as an award-winning female poet, was haunted by questions of legitimacy and dilettantism throughout her career.

Struggling for their rights to establish their identity, Amrita and Kamala tried to break the system of male patriarchy and accepted woman as a human being who has an individual identity.

Feminine Sensibility

Amrita Pritam and Kamala Das, ambassadors of female fraternity, delved deep into the experiences, emotions, and struggles of women in society, albeit through different lenses. The poetry of Kamala Das following her confessional style often echoed the struggles of women in a conservative society. In her poem ‘An Introduction’, she challenged societal norms and asserted her right to self-expression and autonomy.

“I am every woman who seeks love, and refuses to be contained.”

In ‘The Looking Glass’, Das confronted the taboo surrounding female desire and the aging female body. Through the female protagonist’s introspection, Das challenged society’s obsession with youth and perfection.

*“I am what I am, you see— And I look for pity not
admiration Or any extenuating excuse To be what I
am.”*

Infact, it is because of these bold articulation of her thoughts Iyenger (1985) observed that Kamala Das emerged as a new phenomenon in Indo- Anglican poetry. He compared her feminine sensibility to that of Toru Dutt or even Sarojini Naidu as she dared to articulate the hurts she had received in an insensitive man-made world (p.680). Throughout her work, the moments of her anguish and distress were powerfully demonstrated. In her poem ‘The Prisoner’ this was vividly seen

*“As the prisoner studies
His prison’s geography
I study the trappings
Of your body dear love,
For I must some day find
An escape from its shore.”*

It was for this Nambiar (2000) shared his observation about the relevance of Kamala Das poetry, “She becomes a feminist writer by making her women conscious and providing them wings to rise and flutter... The essence of her poems is struggle about her own self and... is a cry for freedom.” (p.122)

Whereas Amrita Pritam, while exploring the themes of love, loss, and identity in her poetry, portrayed women with great empathy and understanding, giving voice to their innermost thoughts and desires. Her female characters embodied resilience and a quest for autonomy, reflecting Pritam's own rebellious spirit and feminist sensibilities.

In Pritam's poem 'Ajj Akhan Waris Shah Nu' (Today I Invoke Wasis Shah) she addressed Waris Shah, a Punjabi Sufi poet, lamenting the pain and anguish of women during the partition of India. The poem is a powerful plea for empathy and understanding towards the plight of women who suffered during the partition violence. Here, Pritam portrayed women not just as victims but as resilient individuals who endured immense hardships with courage and dignity.

*"O Waris Shah, I say to you, speak from your grave
And add a new page to your book of love
Today, a daughter of Punjab has been dishonoured"*

In this poem 'Ranjhana' (The Queen's Rhapsody), Pritam portrayed the inner strength and resilience of a queen who defied societal expectations and chose to live life on her own terms. The queen's refusal to conform to traditional roles and her embrace of independence and freedom were celebrated in the poem.

*"I am a woman who walks alone But I am not lost For I
have found my own path And I walk it with pride"*

These examples illustrate how Amrita Pritam's poetry showcased the resilience and strength of women, highlighting their ability to confront challenges, defy norms, and assert their self in a patriarchal society.

In essence, both Amrita Pritam and Kamala Das contributed significantly to female representation in poetry by offering nuanced and multi-dimensional portrayals of women's lives, experiences, and emotions. They challenged stereotypes, broke silence, and celebrated the strength and resilience of women, making them enduring icons in Indian literature.

Autobiographical in Nature

Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam both drew extensively from their own life experiences. Their poetry served as a medium through which they articulated their innermost thoughts and emotions.

Kamla Das's poetry for example has been characterized by its pure honesty, and willingness to confront taboo subjects to an extent that she can be equated with the confessional poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. She often used "I" and "me" in her poems, directly addressing personal experiences and feelings. Hence, the tone of confession constantly marked her poems like 'The Sunshine Cat', 'The Invitation', and 'The

Looking Glass' to name a few. In 'The Invitation' she boldly described her sexual experience:

*"I want no other
On the bed with him, the boundaries of
Paradise had shrunk to a mere
Six by two and afterwards . . ."*

Without any qualms, she described her traumatic experiences of lovemaking and of the sexual act in most of her poems. E.V. Ramakrishnan (1977) rightly stated that in her poetry, Kamala had always dealt with the private humiliations and sufferings which were the stock themes of confessional poetry (p.34). Her dissatisfaction in marriage and life corroded her consciousness, and that was what she seemed to have decided to express through the medium of poetry. In fact, the poetry of Kamala Das was devoted to her confessions of her sex life. Sexual humiliation became a central theme in her poetry. She went to the extreme in her frank treatment of sex. In 'The Looking Glass' she wrote:

*"Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman,
the scent of Long hair,
the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood,
and all your Endless female hungers."*

Kamala Das added a new dimension to the poetry of love and feminism. Her frank admission and bold treatment of her private life made her a great confessional poet.

Although Amrita Pritam also incorporated elements of personal experience and emotion into her poetry, but she could not typically be categorized as a confessional poet in the same sense as Kamala Das. Her poetry frequently contained autobiographical elements, drawing from her own life experiences, including her relationships and struggles. She delved into the depths of human emotion, exploring themes of love, longing, desire, pain, and loss from her personal point of view.

There are poems like, 'The Bridge', 'Empty Space' and 'Letter' which although were part of her romantic journey but they also reflected her pain of separation. In her poem 'Letter' from her anthology 'Sunhede' (Messages) she has aptly expressed her sentiments about her love and relation with Sahir Ludhianvi.

*"My love! You wrote me a letter.
But you addressed it care of the world.
My Friend you do not know that love-letter is as long as
the earth, as wide as sky.
Was grabbed by worldly people and clipped into little
pieces of the size of different nations."*

Accepting the fact that her dream of love for Sahir would never come true, she found a compatible companion Imroz. Describing her depth of love and respect for him with whom she shared a caring bond filled with love, she dedicated her last poem titled as 'Main Tenu Pher Milangi' (I shall meet you again) to him. Written just a few days before her death, the poem is regarded as her perfect epilogue, showcasing her unique perspective on life and her vision of love.

*"I will meet you yet again
How and where,
I don't know Perhaps I will become a figment
Of your imagination or may be
Splaying myself as a mysterious line
On your canvas"*

Unlike Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam may not fit neatly into the category of confessional poetry, but her works undoubtedly can be considered to be autobiographical in nature. Poetry served as catharsis for both of them thereby allowing them to express their overwhelming emotions and innermost feelings.

CONCLUSION

Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam are both renowned poets who have made significant contributions to Indian literature, particularly in the exploration of themes such as celebrating femininity and challenging societal norms. While both poets share some similarities in their thematic concerns, their styles and approaches to poetry exhibit distinct differences.

Kamala Das, known for her bold and confessional style, often explored the complexities of love, marriage, and the search for identity. Deeply honest and emotive, her poetry employs colloquial language and vivid imagery. Through an unapologetic approach to poetry, she made a blunt refusal to the societal expectations and claimed for her own identity. On the

other hand, Amrita Pritam's poetry also addressed themes of femininity, identity, and societal expectations. However, her work often reflected a deeper impact of her own times especially partition of India and Pakistan. She surely examined the struggles of women within patriarchal structures but unlike Kamala celebrated their resilience and strength. Lyrical beauty and poetic imagery adorned her poetry. The language used by her was often more formal as compared to Das's poems, reflecting her background in classical Punjabi literature.

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