ALIENATION AND EXISTENTIAL CRISIS IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

Shakeba Jabeen Siddiqui

Department of English, R.H. Govt. P.G. College, Kashipur, Udham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand, India

ABSTRACT

Kamala Das occupies a unique position among the women poets of the post-independence period. She had very boldly and honestly voiced the issues of male-dominant Indian society, where a woman is expected to be submissive, subservient and docile. One can mark the fierceness, lack of inhibition, the freshness of description, compelling originality, sincerity, existential crises, identity crises, alienation, and elements of confession in her poetry. She has an efficient command of verse, language and technique. She is a voice to the unspoken, unuttered, buried and painful experiences of the common Indian woman. The present investigation highlights the elements of alienation and existential crises that are the product of her fierceness and quest for love. “Her poetry voices to the full not only the existential pressure generated during the modern Indian women’s journey from tradition to modernity but even the Indian woman poet’s sense of commitment to reality.” [1].

Keyword: Kamala Das, Alienation, Existential Crisis, Loneliness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Alienation is one of the dominant themes in twentieth century literature, especially in the post-world war I literature of the west. Industrialization, loss of faith in God, growth of modern philosophy and existential philosophy can be said to be some of the major factors responsible for human conditions. Alienation has been variably defined but the concept was first philosophically elaborated by Hegel followed by Feuerbach and Karl Marx. According to Hegel, “Nature is only a self-alienated (self-estranged) form of Absolute Mind and man is the absolute in the process of de-alienation.” While Feuerbach observed that “Man is not self-alienated God, On the contrary, God is self-alienated man. The de-alienation of man which is God. On the contrary, God is self –alienated man. The de-alienation of man which is God.” [2]

These definitions, however, regard alienation more as a general human condition rather than arising out of a specific condition. The definition of Karl Marx is more relevant:

“Man does not experience himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that the World (nature, others and He Himself) remain alien to him. They stand above and against him as objects of his own creations Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself. Passively, receptively as the Subject separated from the object.” [2]

Eric Fromm also voices a similar idea, “a mode of experiences in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say estranged from himself as the centre of his world, as the creator of his own acts but his acts and consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys or whom he may even worship. The alienated person is out of reach with any person. He, like the others, is experienced as things. Are experienced with the senses and with common sense, but at the same time without having related to oneself and to the world outside productivity.” [3]

Karl Marx had differentiated four kinds of alienation, viz. the alienation (i) of man from the products of his own activity, (ii) of man from his productive activity itself, (iii) of man from his human essence, and (iv) of man from other men. On the other hand, while Lewis Feuer [4] pointed out six kinds of alienation, viz. the alienation (i) of class society, (ii) of the competitive society, (iii) of industrial society, (iv) of mass society, (v) of race, and (vi) of generation. Melvin Seeman [5] gives five modes of alienation, viz. powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement. Tavis [6] broadly identifies two kinds of alienations, namely (i) social alienation and (ii) self-alienation.
It would be difficult to pick out any one definition that fits the human conditions that Kamala Das portrayed in her poetry. However, a close reading of her poems revealed an urgent and strong wish for death. When she looked back to her past, she realized that her life has been spent yearning for a dream that never came true. Her autobiography witnessed her keen conscious of the futility of her existence. She had failures in almost all her relationships including her marriage, her extramarital relationship, she had nothing to look forward to, except the depressing old age. She found herself in a state of alienation and desired to withdraw from all the activities and interactions. The lust she flaunted is the only face to hide her pain, agony and loneliness.

To be frank, I have failed
I feel my age and my uselessness,
All I want now is to take a long walk
Into the sea and lie there, resting, completely uninvolved. [7]

This clearly shows her attitude of withdrawal and a state of alienation, which in extremes results in the death-wish. During one of her severe illnesses, she experienced death call, she gave a vivid description of that experience in the following words in her autobiography.

It was the beginning of a delightful death, which removes
Before it stabilizes itself, all anxieties are connected with this world. [8]

For a person who had experienced only pain and suffering in her life, death is a welcome relief. However, a remarkable fact that conveys from her poems is that it is always the sea that appeared to be a desired receptor of the body. This indicates certain identification with the sea. Close reading of the poems of Kamala Das which contain imagery of the sea revealed that she deeply related to the sea. The sea was her confidant. Sea is related to her life. Her life is like the sea ever-receiving what was given, the wanted and the unwanted. Her desire to die is an expression of her detachment from the world and to become one with the calm and quiet depth of the sea. The hopelessness of life drove her to death. She wished to die because death seems welcoming to her. She talked of her obsession with death and how it occurred to her that death was the ultimate answer:

I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death.
I have come to believe it is the only reality.
It is endless, stretching before and beyond our human existence
to slide into it will be to pick up a new significance.
Life has been despite all emotional involvements, as ineffectual as writing on moving water.
We have been mere participants in someone else’s dream. [8]

The futility of life haunted her which was an outcome of her failure to receive her portion of love. Suddenly, she realized that the dream of love and peace is unreal. This realization culminated in passive attitude and all her positive efforts to gain meaning in the life had failed as she has nothing to move forward in life.

Dear tree, ugly tree, I call you my morning
Tree, and when I wake, I run to look at you......
No leaves, no buds, no flowers......
......no hope, no hope, no hope at all. [9]

The repeated use of the words ‘no hope’ portrays the intensity of hopelessness. She identified herself with the barren, ugly, old tree. Although throughout her life she disguised happiness and contentment, however, it was a fiasco. There came a stage when she neither had the strength nor the need to keep up this disguise. It was time to face the bitter truth, but for her death is not, like it was for Emily Dickinson an eminent American poet, as a mystical experience. Devendra Kohli [10] here quotes, “The poet cannot synthesize the inner and the outer, the soul and the body as creator. So, she thought of becoming her negative creator by blowing up either of the two. To Kamala Das, death has none of the charms of mystical experience. She found death desirable because her life is not going to be redeemed or made new.” She welcomes death as she finds life meaningless. Love for her is an overpowering need and its denial results in an existential issue. Her disgust finds expression in the poem ‘A Request’, she wrote:
When I die do not throw the meat and bones away
But pile them up and let them tell
By their smell what life was worth on this earth
What love was worth in the end.[11]

Here the feelings of worthlessness are very strong. Living means bearing the burden of this flesh and its hunger. The body is a means for reaching the soul. But, when the soul and even the heart remains untouched and only the hunger of the flesh is satisfied, there is a feeling of hollowness and disgust, and one feels alienated from one’s own body. Broadly speaking there may be two reasons for her disappointment. One, when the person moves along the prescribed norms belying his self, and other when a person tries to rebel against the prescribed norms. She tried both ways. Her married life failed because she walked on the prescribed path of a perfect husband-wife relationship. This only meant covering beneath her husband’s personality and covering up all the humiliation, pain, anguish and dissatisfaction. She then tried to take the rebellious path. She indulged in extramarital relationships but this also brings her disappointment. It never goes beyond the body and only resulted in guilt and pain and her behavior was in fact instigated by her husband’s attitude. She saw a very cherished institution crumbling down in front of her. Her notion for a husband was a person who could understand her, give her scope for growth, one who could enhance her personality, charm, and provide her with spiritual, physical and emotional gratification. When her husband failed to live up to her expectations, she sought these qualities in other men. But soon she discovered that those other men were also like her husband, only concerned with the bodily pleasure and lovemaking. This lack of gratification and alienation from the body led her to wish for death. Depriving a man of the body means rejecting him. The sum of all these feelings together drives her towards death she desired to destroy her body, putting an end to her life as life has only been for her a picture of despair and the only gift it gave was hopelessness and disgust.

Love and companionship are basic needs of all human beings. It may take different forms in each individual. According to their nature, even an ascetic, who is detached from all worldly elements is in search of the love of God. A girl in Indian society is brought up with taboos, she is trained since childhood not to express herself feelings to anybody. She has to subdue her feelings and respond only when her partner expresses his desires. The process of indoctrination right from childhood makes a woman docile and dependent on the male. On the other hand, it is natural for her to have desires and expectations from life, but society taught her to suppress them. However, at some stage in her life, these desires and expectations assert themselves and thus lead to conflict resulting in alienation. In one of her poem Amrita Pritam describes the plight of women.

I am doll of flesh, for you to play with
I am a cup of young blood for you to drink.
Take me in your arms for you to drink.

Kamala Das also faced a similar situation when her desire to forge a meaningful and deeper relationship with her husband or with her men was thwarted, she put on a mask of content wife and at times of a lustful woman. She tried to give men what they wanted in order to receive love in small exchange, but again the result was the same:

.....while our minds are willed to race towards love:
But, they only wander, tripping idly over puddles of desire.

Can’t this man with nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the skin’s lazy hungers?
[13]

Here, the poet’s desire is for a meaningful relationship. Commenting on the poem, T.N. Dhar [14] very aptly remarks, “What emerges from the ‘The Freaks’ is that the poet or her persona is in search of a meaningful relationship with her lover in which love is not lust. So many of her poems clarify that love, which normally would imply an emotional connection, is essentially for her a state of mind. Lust is mostly associated with the body, but love is seated in the mind.”

This denial of love and her projection of a false image of herself led to disastrous consequences. People believe her to be what she only projected and this only increased her hopelessness and depression. The opposition between the projected image and her real self is one of the main causes of alienation. This failure in the relationship denied her any meaning in life and with time it became an existential problem. Her hopelessness...
and despair, as Anisur Rahman [15] remarks, is existential, “Kamala Das’s failure to establish an eternal bond and realize the meaning of existence is at the root of her existential despair.”

This helplessness and despair made her withdraw into a shell of loneliness and seek isolation. In some of her poems, she described herself as if she reached a stage where nothing matters to her and where there is no improvement.

“I no longer care, whom I hurt with love and often without.” [16]

She had concluded that if no relationship endured, the only result was pain, then what is the use of carrying the burden of relationships. It was better to live in a state where you feel nothing. She was better to live in a state where you feel nothing. She was aware that each relationship took its toll on her and therefore she wanted to live a life that is devoid of involvement. She had learned the lesson of self-betrayal. Her great grandmother taught her honesty, decency, faithfulness and loyalty. Kamala tried to live up to these standards but couldn’t succeed. In her despair, she always remembers that:

“There is a house far away where once, I received love.” [17]

The house and her grandmother symbolized honesty, innocence and purity. She betrayed her grandmother’s teachings and in return, she was betrayed by her lovers. She had betrayed herself by not following the path of honesty, purity and innocence. In her confusion and conflicts, the only one out was to break away from her present situation. This breaking away has a dual dimension, one is breaking away from the present involvement and the other is breaking away from the involvement itself. She is, however, aware that her relationships, which were still filled with the same lust that she had already received excessively. But they can’t hold her too long, and she could break whenever she wished. She would not allow her deepest feeling to be hurt. There would be no one in particular for whom she would yearn. As she has been an instrument of enjoyment all along, now she would make the other person as the instrument of her choice. She desired to break away from that involvement and achieve something different:

I have come with only a picnic bag to this new city

To seek a blind date, to shed as snakes do, weariness........[18]

She is breaking away from all sorts of involvement, where a woman is treated as an object. She didn’t want one-sided relationship. A certain amount of dislike occurs in her poems for the relationship which is the result of her painful experiences.

I have learnt that friendship cannot endure, that blood ties do not satisfy. [19]

The loneliness that arises at the end of every relationship made her recoil. The temporary escape which she sought in the relationship too led to the same results. Therefore, she wished to shrink away from any kind of attachment. A study of the poems regarding her love life, its trials, its difficulties and ultimate results of loneliness shows that all along there was the struggle between the soul and the body. The poet always partyed to assert her emotions, but every time she faced the bitter reality that only physical bond endures:

We have spent our youth in gentle sinning
Exchange some insubstantial love.....

We have lain in ever weather, nailed, No, not
To crosses, but too soft beds and against softer forms........[20]

These lines show that physical associations gave her a feeling of having sinned and this led to guilt. The poet however tried something positive from this depressing condition. She attempted to accept what life has to offer. The absence of emotional gratification is fulfilled with physical gratification. But this did not prevent her from a deeper and more fulfilling relationship. Male dominance over her body made her split into two aspects of personality. One is a tender woman, taught passively, acceptance, tolerance and compromise, and the other is the woman, who wants to assert herself as an individual. This oscillation between her two extremes enhances her desolation and results in her self-alienation.

In Indian society, a wife has to live under the shadow of a man, a woman dissolved herself completely into the identity of her husband. The woman does assert her desire and wishes for the involvement of the man but the man considers it his birthright to owe a woman. The sensitive
nature of Kamala had made it difficult to accept this. As a result, she started disliking her female body as Iqbal Kaur also observed, ‘Kamala found it difficult to reconcile with man-woman relationships as a relationship in which man is the subject and woman is the object the other’ she further said, “being female and being fully human were mutually exclusive, nauseated her. Since she has an acute consciousness of the fact that the society tried to trap a woman in their biology, she came to hate her female body.”

A woman not being treated as a human is a very disturbing notion for Kamala Das. This growing urge to assert herself as an individual provoked her subdued femininity. Realizing that woman’s femininity is only defined in relation to man’s masculinity, and there is no existence of her own, disturbed her. She viewed femininity not in a biologically defined structure but as an individual. She advocated to re-define femininity, free from the clutches of male dominance. For her there is a need to rebel against these norms and there is always a streak of rebellions in her personality and poems. She wished to break away from the marital institution which is said to be such a significant part of the woman’s existence. Sense of alienation can be seen from these lines:

I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon
You built round me with morning tea,
love-birds flung from doorways and of course
your tired lust. I shall someday take wings fly around……. [21]

A loveless relationship, be it a marriage, becomes a burden, a cage from which one wishes to free oneself. The only way out is rebellions. She was a rebel by heart and her desire was to establish herself as a woman, who could be recognized as an individual. She loved to be unconventional. Her efforts to rebel against her situation as a married woman was a conscious effort. She was aware that it could either give her the desired happiness or it could push her into the darkness of loneliness. Unfortunately, the latter was to be her date. Each failure and disappointment increased her burden of loneliness that led her to detachment and alienation. There is strangeness in her detachment as she felt detached within an involvement. She is unable to break away totally, thus there is detachment existing within an attachment. This peculiar nature of her estrangement is evident in quite a few of her poems:

My body’s wisdom tells and tells again
That I shall find my rest, my sleep, My peace
And even death, nowhere else, but here in my betrayers’ arms.......... [22]

Here we noticed her alienation from relationships because they are meaningless. However, she continued to live the absurdity reminding us of Camus’ Sisyphus. She perhaps knows that she will never be able to forge a meaningful relationship, yet she continued her quest for meaningfulness in love. She emerged as an absurd heroine if we take into account Camus’ notion of the absurd. Thus, she carries on the relationships, but in a certain detached manner, where she mechanically fulfilling all her duties as a wife and mother. However, at certain moments, the hope of her transcends the absurdity arises. This hope gives her strength to live on within the relationship but she at the same time doubts her hope will not yield any positive result. Ultimately, when all her hopes were belied, she turned to her imagination and dreamt of a union with Lord Krishna. She called her distractions and involvements in the world minor faults which forced her to move away from her true destination in her ultimate reunion with Lord Krishna. Both her poems and biography confirm her wish of alienation from the world and reunited with Lord Krishna. Poems namely Radha, Radha Krishna, The Maggots,…lines addressed to devdasi voiced her desire for their union. In one of her poems, she described the nature of this reunion:

This becomes from this hour, our river and this old Kadamba

Tree, ours alone, for our homeless soul to return some day,

To hang like bats from its pure physically..........[23]

In another poem ‘Radha’, she described the pleasure that she received in the thought of lord

O Krishna I am melting, melting, melting

Nothing remains but You.......... [24]
The last line focused on the concept of escape from reality on which her love is bestowed on Lord Krishna. It took her thought to the realms, but how long can a dream survive? When reality asserts itself, she again comes face to face with the desperateness, loneliness and despair that in fact push her more towards alienation. In words of Anisur Rahman [15], “Kamala Das’ concerns with life in its various facets gives her an access to reality. She seems to move from the dark end to a region of twilight glimmer and as the poem unfold her process she appears to have struggled for love and failed, sought an emotional refuge in the past and waited for Krishna and finally realizing the futility of all has taken stances in a philosophical detachment”

2. CONCLUSION

Her detachment is based on a rational realization of the futility of life which is the significant cause of her alienation. There is enough evidence in her poems presented here and autobiography in this research that can prove the hypothesis. In her case, alienation was the direct consequence of her failure to achieve a satisfactory relationship that involves not only the body but emotions and soul. There are some traces of social alienation in which she found norms of the society oppressive for a woman. She cannot come to terms with them but at the same time, she did not reject them in totality. She tried to act like the perfect wife and also tried to rebel. She kept her relationship with her husband but also entered into extramarital relationships. There was always a conflict in her behavior which tried to reconcile the contradictory. The social conventions, her desire to achieve love and assert herself as an individual come in the way. On the other hand, when she tried to assert her individuality and reached for love outside the bonds of marriage her failure only increased her frustration and left her with the burden of guilt. This made her feel alienated for her self and at the end of it all we find a woman, who is completely exhausted and who now yearns for peace, which can come only from a total lack of involvement in relationships:

All I want now is to take a long walk into the sea
And lie there, resting, completely uninvolved. [7]

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