

FEMINIST PSYCHE AT WORK: THE POETRY OF MAMTA KALIA

Renu Gaur*

ABSTRACT

Mamta Kalia, born in 1940, is one of the pioneering post-Independence poets who started her influential literary writing at the tender age of nine. Having the unique distinction of writing in Hindi and English, Kalia humorously says, eliciting Rushdie, that she has "no transit problems". She has published only two collections of poetry in English, Tribute to Papa (1970) and Poems' 78 (1979), but she has left an indelible mark on the firmament of Indian English poetry. Her works reverberates the issues of love, marriage, social and family relationships and degeneration of human values in modern society. Mamata Kalia has been said to "capture the tragicomic nitty-gritty of routine". As an Indian poet, she portrays the pathetic plight of a woman in relation to parents, family, society and profession. Her poems are "tightly constructed, and make their points economically". (D'Souza ,19) . She voices for the cause of a world free from discrimination, hypocrisies and prejudiced rules imposed on women.

Keywords: *Feminist Psyche, Degeneration of Human Values, Tragicomic Nitty-Gritty of Routine.*

Introduction

Mamata Kalia is no strident, feminist activist... Yet her poetry shares a vital concern with the basic propositions of women's demands for an equitable life. She has not only the passion for individuality but also supports the feminist agenda for liberation from patriarchal operation, and other limitation. (Vashishth ,149) She seems to be seriously involved in the power struggle to dislodge patriarchy. She is outspoken in her outpouring and "delineate the social predicament, religious barriers and its restrictions on women". (Subhashini, 85). The self of Kalia is unique because her writings are highly autobiographical in content depicting her early life with an idiosyncratic father, a cynical husband and his family, failure in her professional life and a sense of consistent revolt against the patriarchal hegemony. Bruce King comments: The present contemporary manner appears to have been initiated by Mamata Kalia who explores the themes, attitudes, voices and registers of speech which have been taken further by D'Souza and Silgado. (King, 155).

In her first poetry collection Tribute to Papa, which is according to Eunice D'Souza, one of the most compelling poems, Kalia reveals the dichotomous relationship between daughter and father reflecting her inner conflicts and experiences. The work ironically duplicates the representative of patriarchy and his cherished values. The female persona questions abruptly her father's idealism – "who cares for you papa?" The father, an upholder of traditional values, wishes his daughter to be an angel – but the daughter revolts and discards all idealism candidly -"who cares for your clean thoughts , clean words, clean teeth / Who wants to be an angel like you?".

Rejecting the lower economic status and coded in the 'third world ling' of the fatherland 'Papa' is requested towards capitalism foreshadowing India's economic liberalism:

I wish you had guts, Papa;
To smuggle eighty thousands watches at a stroke,
I would proudly say, "my father's in import export business, you know '
I'd be proud of you then. (Tribute, 8-11)

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, SPNKS Government College, Dausa, Rajasthan, India.

She makes fun of her father's inability to do anything except 'praying' and spending 'useless hours at the temple'. She builds her own identity and rejects to abide by the patriarchal dominance imposed on her:

You want me to be like you, Papa,
Or like Rani Lakshmbai.
You're not sure what greatness is ,
But you want me to be great. (17-20)

She mocks at her father's sense of greatness and gives "two donkey-claps for his uprightness. Kalia represents a bold, modern and awakened woman who voices her frustration and depression at the same time. The unfulfilled desire to transform the society leaves her perplexed and baffled. Tribute to Papa is a veiled angry poem schizoid in content, cry... and a disowning of parentage." (Prasad and online). She revolts with a defiant attitude, "These days I am seriously thinking of disowning you, Papa/ you and your sacredness." But the poem closes on a note of submission to the wishes of her father, "But I'll be careful, Papa/ Or I know you'll at once think of suicide". This sudden shift is quite painful and ironical as she figures out an opposition not only to men's dominance over women but women's acceptance of men's dominance. This sudden change of mood reflects her personality split between "two worlds of tradition and modernity, freedom and bondage, domesticity and professionalism..." (Vashistha, 57).

The institution of marriage aggravates more miseries in the pathetic plight of a woman leaving her in utter repressed and depressed condition. Her poetry throws ajerks – unwanted by the male world. She describes marriage which has given nothing except "two children /and two miscarriages" (de Souza, 21). She proves to be a great fool to think that marriage is bliss. She is reduced to a housewife despite of having "a degree in textile designing". The female persona highlights her pain of being an acknowledged her skill in "debates, dramatics and games...." (Kalia poems 78).

In After Eight Years of Marriage, the persona remembers how her parents enquired of her married life when she visited her home for the first time. She realize the absurdity of this question – "Are you happy?". She recalls all the agonies experienced by her but hides the traces wearing sham cheerfulness. The ending is quite poignant, "So I swallowed everything and smiled a smile of great content". (26 -78). Kalia presents the heart wrenching picture of obedient and accommodating Indian wife who swallows everything and maintains her smiles amidst all tortures.

In the poem "Matrimonial Bliss", the superficiality of blissful married life, devoid of love and understanding, is reflected :

I feel all disjointed inside
But the moment I hear your footsteps
I put all of me together
And give you my best smile. (Tribute, 30).

A subjugated wife, being broken totally from inside, waits 'anxiously' for her husband. She keeps herself hanging like an 'appendix' to him. The words are highly suggestive of the pain of a woman which is destined to her with the very fact of being born a woman. A woman has no independent existence, identity or freedom of will. "A woman has no independent existence, identity or freedom of Will and she always exists in relation to others. The eternal destiny of a woman is to remain as an 'appendix' in her husband's book of life. The loss of a woman's identity is a byproduct of repressive patriarchal system. She is reduced to a 'note of milk and bread'. As Beauvoir says "Woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave, the two sexes have never shared the world in equality".

The so-called pious wedlock snatches away her identity and makes her disillusioned: "I am a great fool to think that marriage is bliss". (Tribute,8). The emptiness between husband and wife despite of physical consummation is presented in the lines. "They made love and eat sandwiches and looked at each other's face to empty cans". (Tribute, 16).

The boredom, anxieties, the routine and responsibilities lead towards the death of love. But Kalia is fully aware of the Indian culture and whatever the sufferings of a married life, she thinks of 'subordination by domestication'. She requests to her husband to live all over again. The poem 'New Deal', requests for leading a new life afresh forgetting the past and 'making new content with new references'. She comes to a compromising deal by saying 'let bygones be bygones'. The existential dilemma of a middle-class woman is depicted with rare felicity:

Life of a woman is very difficult; you are bound to adjust everywhere.

I really hate the world adjust... Marriage is an adjustment it is one-sided elastic band where a woman's patience is stretched. (Kalia) .

The dismal experiences of a woman's life have emboldened her to put up with the troubles of her existence and make new decision. She writes, "Instead of fighting, I start writing".(Kalia ,58.) Kalia discerns very well the female psyche suffocating under Indian tradition. While projecting strategies to get hold of male oriented space, she performs contradictory roles. In "Inside out" , she says:

I feel some parts of me are gathering fire

And some parts, ice

A part of me is a jackal

A part of me is an ass

A part of me is a swan

A part of me is a fawn.

Humiliation and exploitation of a woman in her professional career get space in Kalia's poetry. In the poem, "How Like A Fool, she reveals how a woman makes a balance between the boredom of household chores and workplace. She undergoes frustrations and dilemmas while working and her promotion is dependent not on her capabilities but on male's 'naughty knees'. Groaning under the weight of exhausting professional career, the protagonist resolves, "I'll hit you! I will tear you up! I will stamp on you! ". Behaving strategically she says, "Thank you, Sir". She revolts against the age-old conventions imposed by patriarchy which has made a 'cipher' out of her. The poetry of Mamta Kalia is loaded with "an unceasing content of restlessness". (Patnaik, online)

In a male dominated society, a woman is expected to be submissive, sacrificing and accommodating and living in the 'concentration camp' what Kalia lashes out the sacrificial role be stored on a woman: No I am no pelican to my son /Nor a dove to my love". (Tribute, 8) She prefers to be 'an antibiotic against all infections' .Like a true postmodern poet Kalia defies the social norms and "probes into the desire to seek the death of the real". (Shahane, 738).

She wants to cross all restrictions and standards fixe by the society and desires to have her own self, "I want to face Sunday visits/ totally undressed.../ I want to reveal/ my real age. (Tribute,12)

Amidst all these pressures, Kalia retains hope for emancipation of women through the medium of writing. She writes in an interview:

Creative expression is a lone man's battle against the enormous uncertainty of this universe....I may not be able to transform the world but I can certainly make them see through my minus three eyesight....The hope of being heard and read always exists. (Kalia, 63-64).

The issues of women, in one form or another, take place in the poetry of Mamta Kalia. Her poetry is a clarion call for the Indian woman stuck in gender-based discrimination and exploitation.

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