

Female Sexuality in the Writings of Kavita Sinha, Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam

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Abstract

Kavita Sinha, Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam are considered as outstanding women writers in three major Indian Languages such as Bengali, Malayalam and Punjabi. Through her writing, Kavita Sinha has participated in the struggles for freedom of women of her time. Her literary works have helped expanding the feminist space, especially the sexuality of women, in Bengali literary culture. Kamala Das, a well-known Indian English writer belongs to a traditional Hindu family in Kerala openly and honestly talks about sexual desires of Indian women, which made her an iconoclast of her generation. Amrita Pritam's unconventional way of writing, thinking and living become quite controversial in the literary circle of Punjab. In her writings, she revolt against the traditional man-woman relationship, and challenges all the taboos. Despite of being from different socio-cultural backgrounds, the paper argues that there is significant amount of similarity in the treatment of female sexuality in their writings.

Keywords: Society, Literature, Women writing, Feminism, Character, Female sexuality.

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India is a land of diversity of region, religion, ethnicity, cast, etc. This diversity has also been reflected in the case of language and literature as well. There are at least twenty-one major languages and so many minor languages together constitute the literary tradition of India. Many of these languages have found an important place in world literature through their contributions in terms of dramas, poetry, short-stories novels etc. In spite of these diversities, many comparative studies show that certain common trends are evident which cuts across these languages. Women writing are an important segment in contemporary Indian literature. Female sexuality appears to be one of the most important theme in contemporary women writings. This paper is an attempt to study the theme of female sexuality in the writings of three important women writers who belong to different linguistic tradition of India. Kavita Sinha, Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam are considered as outstanding women writers in three major Indian Languages such as Bengali, Malayalam and Punjabi.

The main stream literature has always been rooted in its traditional and patriarchal social structure. Characterization of both males and females in those writings has reflected the so-called realities of their society. Subordination of women either has been taken for granted or being completely ignored mainly in these forms of writings. A dominant male character who is leading or playing a crucial role in all social institutions has been a common feature in these writings. At the same time female characters have been perceived as an instrumental object for the satisfaction of the subjective pleasure of male characters. In this context, the writings of Kavita Sinha, Kamala Das, and Amrita Pritam have marked a departure from the conventional literary traditions in a way that they have exhibited immense courage and boldness in their writings, which has often questioned the traditional patriarchal social norms and conventional moralities. Hence, their writings have the tendency to deviate from the conventional contemporary literature of their own socio-cultural context.

Through her writing, Kavita Sinha (1931-1998) has participated in the struggles for freedom of women of her time. Kavita Sinha was born into a traditional landlord Kshatriya family in Calcutta. She spent most of her happy childhood days in her mother's paternal home in

Andul. Kavita Sinha used to read with her mother. Her mother, only fifteen years older to her, was a lonely person who encouraged her daughter to read everything. In Kavita Sinha's family, girls were married off before they turned sixteen. But her mother withstood all pressure and saved Kavita Sinha from early marriage. Her father was very dominant; through him she faced the first experience of male dominance in family and society as well. He always disliked her interests in various arts and used to destroy her paintings and writing pieces. Her father's this kind of behavior creates a rebellious attitude in Kavita Sinha and as an expression of anger she herself destroyed her works. In her early 20's, she fell in love with writer Bimal Roy Choudhury, a Brahmin and married him in 1952, in spite of strong opposition to inter-caste alliance from the family. Kavita Sinha said that while she had thought that her marriage would liberate her from the dominance of male, it really did not happen. Her husband took a dominant role as well.

When she was a teenager, Kavita Sinha used to write a column titled *As I See it* in the *Amritabazar patrika* under the pseudonym 'Sultana Chaudhury' and at the age of 16, her first work *Art and Women* published in the *Anandabazar patrika*. Kavita Sinha began publishing her poems, short-stories and novels in the early 1950's. Critics consider her as a modernist writer because her writings are formally innovative and ponders questions of ontology, but feminists have pointed out that her works also focus on women's identity and independence, discuss women issues and that the protagonists in the fictions are nearly always female. Dibyendu Patil writes "...she was the first rebel and feminist poet in Modern Bengali poetry..."¹ Her literary works have helped expanding the feminist space, especially the sexuality of women, in Bengali literary culture.

Kamala Das (1932-2009), a well-known Indian English writer belongs to a traditional Hindu family in Kerala openly and honestly talks about sexual desires of Indian women, which made her an iconoclast of her generation. She is known as Madhavikutty and Kamala Suraiyya as well. Each name represented a body of her work, a phase of her life or an aspect of her personality. Kamala Das was born into an aristocratic, Nair family in south Malabar, in Kerala. She spent her childhood in Calcutta. Her mother Balamani Amma, famous poet of Malayalam, was her inspiration in writing. She was engaged at the age of fifteen and married to K. Madhava Das when she was hardly sixteen. She was not happy with her marriage.

Kamala Das enjoyed the status of being one of the first poets writing in English from Kerala to be recognized nationally and internationally. At the age of ten Kamala Das short story named *Avalute vidhi* (The Fate of Her) was selected for celebrated Malayalam weekly magazine-*Mathrubhoomi* and published under the name N.Kamala (Nalapat Kamala). Another story *Stree* (Woman), on lesbian theme, was published in *Mathrubhoomi* weekly on 22 June, 1947 under the name Kamala. Kamala Das is a writer who can't be tied down to a particular place or class easily. *My Story* (1976) the most controversial work, the autobiography of Kamala Das cannot be ignored by anyone who is interested in literature. It is the beginning of her exploration in women's experiences and also a collection of her suffering as a woman and as a writer. She tells us her life story without any inhibition. She discloses in the preface: "I have written several books in my lifetime, but none of

them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me”ⁱⁱⁱ An iconoclast of her generation Kamala Das, who very frankly and unabashedly spoke about the Indian women’s sexual desires.

Like Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam’s (1919-2005) unconventional way of writing, thinking and living become quite controversial in the literary circle of Punjab. Known as a ‘goddess of defiance’ⁱⁱⁱ Amrita Pritam, born in Gujranwala, Punjab, now in Pakistan, a rebel and a recalcitrant, even a revolutionary. Amrita lost her mother when she was eleven years old. Soon after the death of her mother, Amrita and her father moved to Lahore, where she lived till her migration to India in 1947. During this period, she suffered a profound feeling of loneliness since she had no brother or sister to share her feelings. The memories of childhood and loneliness of adulthood always haunted her consciousness and these feelings often recurred in her writings. Amrita was engaged at the age of four and when she was a teenager of sixteen got married to Pritam Singh. By getting divorce in 1960, Amrita ended her unhappy married life and in 1964 she started living with Imroz, a painter.

Writing mainly in Punjabi and Hindi, Amrita Pritam works, especially the poetry, tempts the readers to break off the existential contrarities and contradictions of life. She rebelled against her father’s idea of writing religious poems; she used to write romantic poems during this time. When she was fifteen, her first collection of poems was out. The turning point of Amrita’s literary career came during the time of partition when she became the first hand witness of bloodshed and strife on a monstrous scale. Many of her writings deal with the twin theme of women’s oppression and gender relations and revolt against the traditional man-woman relationship, and challenges all the taboos. As a creative and responsive artist, Amrita Pritam contemplated often about the people around her, the social and cultural crisis that she observed from the very childhood. Therefore the writings of Amrita Pritam were the direct product of her socio-cultural experiences and her personal sensitive response to those. In a brief prologue to *The Revenue Stamp*, an autobiography Amrita Pritam wrote: “whatever happened in my life happened between the layers of thought that found their way into novels and poems. What was left? Still, I thought I might write a few lines...”^{iv} Despite of being from different socio-cultural backgrounds, the paper argues that there is significant amount of similarity in the writings of these women writers on the theme of female sexuality.

Without any inhibition, Kavita Sinha wrote about women’s desires, need and emotions from a woman’s perspectives and she boldly handled the theme of female sexuality in her writings. Kavita Sinha’s novel, *Pourush* (Manliness, 1984) is a consequential writing in the arena of Bengali feminist literature. The novel is interwoven form the perspectives of three main characters, Sibnath Mitra, Sarala and Sakhisona. Interestingly enough these three characters belong to three separate sex types, male, female and transgender or third sex. Through the character of Sarala, the novelist tries to depict the ordeal of the middleclass or lower middle class Bengali women. Sarala is a working woman. But working and earning her own livelihood is not her choice of independence rather it was her compulsion. It was after the untimely death of her husband Bijoy; she was compelled to take the job in Bijoy’s office on the compensatory ground.

At the same time, she painfully realizes the truth that in spite of being an earning member of the family, she is no longer wanted in her in laws family, not even in her brother's family.

In the course of the novel, the readers can observe the transformation of Sarala from a naive house wife to self-relying working woman; she emerges as a novo woman, self-reliant, assertive one who works hard to get promotion and salary hike so that she can rent a room in Kolkata and stays alone as she is no longer willing to be a burden neither to her in laws' family nor upon her brother. Sarala's this decision clearly shows that she became aware of her identity as a woman through the bitter experiences of life. This is a quite significant move for a Bengali woman if we consider the time period of the novel because a widow is considered as polluted and has to live very quietly behind the scenes. Hence, this journey of Sarala is not a bed of roses for her. Sarala feels humiliation in her salary hike because of her male colleagues disgusting comments and looks: "When she is walking across the hall, it seems, everyone is looking fixedly at her shoulder as if the senior boss has put the impression of his dyed hand on her shoulders. When she enters the room, it seems to her, Makhan, Rabi are not hiding their *bidis* that way they used to do. While putting gum in the envelopes, she stealthily notices, Rabi and other are gossiping loudly. There is no longer that low voice of respect. Kashi is scratching and pulling his *dhoti* up to his knee."^v This is a clear indication that Sarala's colleagues harbour the sexist attitude and they consider Sarala's salary hike to be an undue advantage of her sex and therefore, she should suffer this disgrace. Sarala's, sex, class and status make other to think like this way and allow them to come into a judgment about her; her sexual appeal and fate as a widow also plays a role in this. Men, who are looking at her with erotic concentration on specific part of her body and desire her, defined her sexuality. Here, patriarchy's psychological tendency to make feel the notion of female inferiority and the social dependency of the female as inferior is evident.

Another significant aspect of Sarala's character is how she looks at and negotiates man-woman relationship in her life. Though, every now and then she pines for the company of her dead husband, she does not react adversatively towards Shibnath's romantic inclination. Even in the park at dark, when Sibnath embraces her and makes sexual advances, Sarala does not oppose it rather becomes a participant though in a passive way in that activity. In another occasion when Mr. Chowdhury, the broken heart father seeks Sarala's company, Sarala mistakes the fatherly affection for sexual drive and in a fit to take revenge on Shibnath, makes her mind to offer her body to Mr. Chowdhury though there is no love interest. Soon her misconception comes to the fore when Mr. Chowdhury discloses that he makes a fail attempt to place Sarala in the position of his eloped daughter. Self-realization dawns at Sarala. She begins to suffer from guilty consciousness when she ponders what sin she was about to commit. She starts feeling for Shibnath whom she accuses so far for being so mean and selfish because she always measured him with her own yardstick, now that has gone wrong.

Kamala Das gives the portrait of a middle-aged ambitious, clever and scheming woman and her rise to power through sexual surrender in her novel *Alphabet of lust* (in Malayalam

Manasi). Manasi, the heroine of the novel, like the protagonist of *My Story* is disillusioned after marriage to an older man. Before getting married to Amol Mitra, a government official, old enough to her father, Manasi was engaged to the elder brother of Vijay Raje by then a teenager who secretly loved her. But her courtship with her fiancé was very short because unfortunately soon he died in an air-crash, leaving her in a deep sorrow and difficult situation with a child in her womb. To hide her pregnancy and avoid the humiliation from society, her parents fix her marriage with Amol Mitra who accepts Manasi and the child without any hesitation. Seething with discontent, she tries to make everyone happy at the early years of her marriage and also tries to be an obedient in front of his lustful sexual hasten. She never feels love for him in fact the cry of her soul increase day by day. There is always an instance conflict in her mind between her earlier expectations from life and the present predicament.

Her twenty years of married life with Amol Mitra makes Manasi a famous poet of Bengal. He never could satisfy her any needs even it is emotional, physical or material even though she does not make any complains until Vijay Raje comes into her life. Her acute deprivation makes her an easy victim of Vijay Raje, now a politician, whose earlier advances has spurned with disdain and contempt. After Raje's influence and recommendation to Mr. Desai, the Prime Minister, Manasi is awarded country's highest literary award for her brilliant service to literature. Raje then invites and lures her to spend a week with him in Shimla with the tantalizing offer of a pair of diamond ear-rings which she has been dreaming for years. As she herself is greedy and ambitious, she accepts his offer and spends a holiday in Shimla with Raje. In the meantime, she comes to know about the Prime Minister's interest in her.

For Manasi disappointment in marriage act as a catalyst that eventually spurs her own to a career in politics when she associates with Vijay Raje. He wants to use Manasi, by introducing and bringing her close to the old and lonely Prime Minister with a view to secure and attain his own dream position in politics. Knowing his intention and keenly aware of the spell of her still attractive body, she is now herself fully determined to capture political power at the highest level. For that she quite uninhibitedly bestows sexual flavors on every man who matters in her political career. So when Prime Minister tries to make love to her, she does not resist him, since she has already decided to offer her body to him: "I rented out my body for a pair of diamond ear-rings. And here after for power I shall rent it out to the most influential tenant I can hope to get."^{vi} That most influential tenant is Prime Minister and Manasi does not want to lose any opportunity to fulfill her growing ambition. Ultimately she becomes his favorite and by then paves the way to her goal. She totally neglects her husband and her nineteen years old daughter Suparna. With her influence, she relegates Vijay Raje behind in Prime Minister's favor; holding a highest position in cabinet herself, by the time of the death of Prime Minister, she becomes so powerful and popular among the ruling party leaders who select her as Prime Minister's successor neglecting Vijay Raje.

In *Chakka number chatti*, Amrita Pritam portrays Alka, bold and more confident female character. In this novel, the author openly talks about her female character's sexuality. Alka is

living an independent life on one level. That independence gives her the courage to get away from her middle-class family and parents and to stay Kangra Village to study painting in Kumar's studio named 'Chakka number chatti'. Alka is a pupil of Kumar, an artist who is very eager to remain in the world of creativity with his art and does not want to lose his identity and freedom falling in any relationships. And more over he does not want any emotional obligation or involvement with any woman because he believes that such relationship spoil his attachment to individual freedom. He needs woman only to satisfy his sexual desires and fantasies: "Kumar wants to enjoy woman when he needs but he is not prepared to tie himself to a woman for number of years."^{vii} So he only prefers a 'paid relationship' with any woman: "He has been visiting that woman who would charge rupees twenty per day but never asked for his freedom." (p.11) Alka falls in love with Kumar and she is ready to accept him the way he is. Her main concern is the love that she feels for him and to get that love, she is willing to do whatever for him. One day, while talking to him, Alka reveals her thoughts: "I wish, I could be that woman whom you used to pay rupees twenty for your visit." (p.11)

Here Alka wishes to have sex with her beloved by paying rupees twenty and plays the role of a wife as logically and legitimately as a prostitute with equal ease because she loves him. The courage of Alka is in this situation is quite outstanding. Now whenever Kumar needs a woman, he goes to Alka by paying rupees twenty and satisfy his sexual desires. But with time course, he falls in love with Alka and day by day the thoughts of her starts to haunt him. Eventually, he confesses: "...now, Alka! It was out of my control and now everything is in your hands." (p.62) Knowing his confused state of mind between his love and individual freedom, she replies: "You can not... until your love and freedom merge into each other and become one." (p.65) Alka concludes that talk by giving expression to her inner feelings as final words: "I shall wait for that day when I would be no more extraneous to your (inner) beings... but, when it becomes intrinsic, convey it to me." (p.100) Eventually Alka decides to lead a life of widow.

Portraying the sexuality of Sarala, a young widow; Manasi a middle-aged mother and Alka a young unmarried woman, Kavita Sinha, Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam showed the courage to challenge the conventional way of Indian women writings. Because still today, talking or writing about the sexuality of a widow, a mother or an unmarried woman is considered as social taboo. Through Manasi, Kamala Das attempts to depict women's sexuality in a different way which is a bit away from conventionally seen. Even though Manasi's sexuality is so provocative, most of the times she takes initiatives in physical relations in her extra-marital affairs especially with Vijay Raje with whom she tries to fulfill her all sexual fantasies. Whereas, she becomes always a passive sufferer physically and mentally as well in terms of her relationship with husband. It clearly shows the lack of feeling in her relationship with her husband. Here a kind of detached objectivity creates a distance between husband and wife and Kamala Das is keenly aware of the complexity of the problem.

In terms of female sexuality, it is not an isolated instance. Kamala Das' other female characters like Sheila and Kalyanikutty in *Chandana marangal* (Sandal Trees) and Rohini in

Rohini also go through the same situation. For them, sex with their husbands becomes unfeeling and not pleasurable. Therefore, here, husband and wife relationship is more like the relationship of some kind of responsibility or duty. But sometimes, they suffer from a specific sexual guilt. After having sex with Vijay Raje in Shimla, for a movement Manasi feels guilty on her act and thinks that she has done a nasty thing and killed something which values more than anything. Sarala's guilt sexuality makes her a passive participant in Sibnath sexual advances. The specific sexual guilt, that comes into the consciousness of Sarala mainly because of her status as a widow who is not allowed to involve or enjoy in any sexual activities by the society. Again we can see this in Alaka, the main female character of Kavita Sinha's novel *Ekti kharap meyer galpo* (The Story of a Notorious Girl). Though she is sensually and sexually oriented, she is confronting a kind of contempt with her sexuality in her consciousness mainly because of the specific sexual guilt she suffers. Hence Alaka first denies Surya's marriage proposal saying that she had already lost her virginity.

Therefore, all these female characters sexual adventures have never been pleasurable for them. Indian morality and cultural ethos and patriarchal notions are the main reasons behind the psychological transference of sexual guilt. And this sexual guilt leads them to a kind of masochism. But at the same time, we could not see any such guilt sexuality in the female characters of Amrita Pritam. Even today, in India premarital sex has been considering as a crime. In such a social milieu, Alka, without any hesitation, seeks what she wants from the man she really loves. Here, Amrita portrays a bold, confident and self-respecting female who does not repent of anything. She did what she wants to do without caring of any social norms. We can see the same confident and self-respect in most of the female characters of Amrita Pritam. For instance, Chetna, main female Protagonist of the novel *Darti, sagar te sippiyaan* (Earth, Sea and Shell), seeks her first sexual experience from the man she loves; and she shows the courage to be a single mother. The female characters of Kamala Das and Amrita Pritam never hesitate to take initiatives in sexual relations. Hence, these female characters are much strong to shake the co-called morality of Indian Society because women in India always seem to hesitate in expressing their suppressed sexual needs or in taking the initiatives in physical relations. This is mainly because of the Indian cultural ethos. Hence, through their writings, they protest against womanhood suppressed by ethics and taboos.

Amrita Pritam, Kavita Sinha and Kamala Das are very strong opponent of the sexual politics practiced by in relation between man and woman; and they hate the double standards of society in matter of female sexuality. The themes of their novels capture women's identity in various situations and moods. Therefore, their novels are not the story of a woman who seeks sex everywhere but the instability of her feelings, conflicting emotions, ranging from the desire for security and intimacy to the assertion of ego, self-dramatization and feeling of share and depression. The co-ordination of these sensitive and emotional elements, that gives the richness of the female consciousness in their writings, which explore the complex human activities through which many women have shaped their lives and with in which they have discovered their powers, limitations, restrictions and connections as females and a human being.

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- ⁱ Dibyndu Patil, *Kavita Sinha: Pratham Naribadi Kavi, Atmaprakash*, vol. 3, August-December, 2012-2013, Pp. 28-29), p.29.
- ⁱⁱ Kamala Das, "Preface" *Mystory* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1988)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bhagyasree Varma (ed), *Amrita Pritam: Life as Literature* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2006) p.7
- ^{iv} Amrita Pritam, "Preface" *The Revenue Stamp*, trans. Krishna Gorowara (New Delhi: Vikas, 1983)
- ^v Kavita Sinha, *Pourush* (Kolkata: Dey's, 1984), p.82.
- ^{vi} Kamala Das, *Alphabet of Lust* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks) p.41
- ^{vii} Amrita Pritam, *Chakka Number chatti* (Delhi: Navyug, 1971) p.11