

Elements of Postmodern Poetry in the poems of Kamala Das: *An Introduction* and *My Grand Mother's House*

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Abstract

Postmodern poetry is a type of poetry that has been explored since the 1960s. This kind of poetry is often noted for bringing new stylistic and thematic aspect in poetry. Postmodern poetry breaks away from the traditional and conventional nuances associated with poetry. It is often written in free form and gives a scope for the reflection of internal thought process of the poets. In Indian context, postmodernism in poetry is a recent trend which began to emerge after 1980. Poets like Nissim Ezekiel, A.K Ramanujan, Keki N. Daruwalla and Imtiaz Dharkar are the harbinger of this trend in Indian Poetry. Kamala Das cannot be left out when postmodernism in Indian poetry is concerned. She is also one poetess whose poetry reflected the elements of postmodernist poetry. In the poems “An Introduction” and “My Grand Mother’s House” the elements of postmodernist poetry like fragmentation, play of words, mini-narratives can be found. Her poetry challenges the conventional subject matters. In her poetry she openly talks about female sexuality and also tries to deconstruct the sexual norm created by the patriarchal society thereby registering her place among the Postmodernists Indian Poets. Therefore, this paper will discuss the elements of Postmodernist poetry in her poems “An Introduction” and “My Grand Mother’s House”.

Key Words: *Postmodernism, Postmodernist Poets, Mini-narrative, Fragmentation, Play of Words.*

Introduction

Postmodernism which is an intellectual and cultural movement emerged in the mid-twentieth century. The term 'postmodernism' itself was first used in 1940s but it gained its prominence in the 1960s and 1970s when it developed into a defining force in literature, architecture, philosophy and the arts. It began to take shape in the aftermath of World War II. Postmodernism emerged as a reaction to period of ideals of progress, rationality and objectivity that were central to modernism. The horrors of the war had a massive impact on the psychology of the people. The failures of scientific and technological progress led to question the grand narratives that the modernist thinkers had championed. Postmodernist thinkers advocate for multiplicity of perspectives, they recognize that knowledge and truth are subjective and culturally constructed thereby contrasting to the views of modernist thinkers who put emphasis on purity, innovation and absolute truth. Postmodernism defies the traditional and conventional methods. It is characterized by resistance to traditional grand narratives. It shows the skepticism on the prevailing grand narratives. Postmodern poetry embraces fragmentation, ambiguity, irony, pastiche, playfulness and pluralism. It also challenges the existing nature of reality, knowledge and representation.

In the context of Indian poetry, postmodernism represents a distancing from the traditional and conventional poetic forms and themes. It encapsulates the complexities of identity, culture, history and globalization. Postmodern Indian Poetry is therefore marked by experimental style and intertextuality and fluidity. The postmodern Indian poetry is written in fragmented and free forms, thus challenging the traditional boundaries of poetry. Modernist are concerned with individual consciousness whereas the postmodern Indian poets often resort to explore the collective identities, challenging both the colonial and postcolonial narratives.

Kamala Das is one of the three most prominent and significant Indian poets writing in English, the other two being Nissim Ezekiel and A. K Ramanujan. She is often considered as a voice of rebellion and a pioneer in exploring the themes of identity, gender and sexuality in the context of Indian patriarchal society. Kamala das often challenges the grand narratives by questioning the established norms. In most of her poems she tries to deconstruct the traditional forms of language and structure. She often employs free verse and a conversational tone her poetry is highly

emotive, self revelatory, moody poems were much more confessional; she wrote openly about varied, often conflicting emotions, values and hopes, without being concerned (King, 7). Her poetry blurs the boundaries of traditional poetry, reflecting characteristics often associated with postmodernism.

The poem “Introduction” first appeared in her first volume of poems which was entitled *Summer in Calcutta* and which was published in 1965. This is an autobiographical poem. This poem is known for her raw, confessional style. This poem strongly projects the complexities of gender roles assigned by the society and a straightforward rejection of the societal expectations. It tries to deconstruct the grand narratives on gender roles in the society. The speaker in the poem interrogates the conventional notion of womanhood, sexuality and femininity constructed by the patriarchal society. This poem is written in a fragmented structure and in a subjective way thereby registering a place in the postmodern poetry.

The poem “My Grandmother’s House” was first published in the book *Summer Time in Calcutta* in 1965. This poem is charged with nostalgia. In this poem the speaker is reminiscing her memorable time spent with her grandmother. The tone of the poem is melancholic. The poem is written in a fragmented style. The longing and memory reflected in the poem lends subjectivity to the poem making it postmodern poem.

Fragmentation and non-linear structure in “An Introduction” and “My Grandmother’s House”

One of the chief characteristics of the postmodern poetry is the fragmented structure. Both the poems do not follow the traditional norm of the poetry. There is no specific rhyme scheme followed. It is written in a fragmented form. Both the poems show non-linear in the progression of the poem. “An Introduction” is written in a series of disjointed and incoherent thoughts, emotions and observations. The narrative is disruptive neither a unified coherent identity is absent. The poem starts with an assertion of the identity “I do not politics but I know the names / Of those who are in power” (Sebastian et al. lines 1-2) but right after that she shifts to more personal expression of the self by writing “I am Indian, very brown, born in / Malabar.” (Sebastian et al. lines 4-5)

It is also noted that the poem starts with the use of the pronoun “I” which signifies the subjectivity of the poem. But towards the end of the poem, the pronoun “I” becomes the

collective voice of the entire women of India when she writes “I too call myself I”. (Sebastian et.al line 55) In the poem she does not maintain a singular, unified persona. The role shifting of the speaker is allowing the speaker’s voice to maintain the fluidity of the identity. This sense of fragmentation and disjointed nature of the poem mirrors the hallmark of the postmodern poems fragmented style. At the same time the fluidity of the speaker aligns the poem to the postmodern tendency to question the stability of the identity and the truth.

In the context of the poem “My Grandmother’s House”, the poem is written in fragmented structure. The narrative technique follows non-linear style. The speaker’s recollections of her grandmother and her grandmother’s house are not presented in a sequential manner. The speaker oscillates between the present and the past as she reminiscences the love and warmth that she receives from her grandmother. Her memories and emotions are projected in a disjointed and fragmentary flow. She begins the poem with a recollection of her grandmother’s house “There is a house now far away where once/ I received love..... That woman died”. (Das, lines 1-2)

She is longing for the love that she once received. There is a sense of fullness. Then very quickly there is an immediate change in the temperament of the speaker in the next few lines where she expresses the loss of that house, “I who have lost”. (Das, line 14) This rushed shift in the mood and the temperament is the signal of the disintegration of the idealized space of the grandmother’s home, highlighting the theme of loss and impermanence of the past which is a strong postmodern concern.

The speaker is caught between her longing for her past which was secured and the harsh present which lack security in her life. Therefore the past and present seems juxtaposed in her psychology. This collapsing of the time emulates the postmodern idea that history is fixed, but rather fragmented and subjective.

The Deconstruction of Gender and Cultural Norms

One of the characteristics of postmodernism is a critique of the established cultural, social and political norms. Both the poems questions the gender and the societal stereotypes imposed on the women. Kamala das in both the poems deconstruct the gender roles assigned to the women thus challenging and rejecting the notion of submissive daughter, wife, or mother that the traditional patriarchal society imposed upon the women. In the poem “An Introduction” she

writes, “Dress in saris, be girl/ be wife they said / Be embroiderer, be cook/ Be a quarreler with servants” (Sebastian et.al lines 34-35) here she is challenging the gender roles assigned to women by the society. The society expects that women should wear sari, women are supposed to spend their time in kitchen, and to involve in a petty quarrel with servants as if women are not capable of performing any other significant roles in the society.

Kamala Das in “An Introduction” writes “Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs/Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair” (Sebastian et.al lines 24-25) she is writing about her body without any inhibition. She also writes “Woman who seeks love. / In him...hungry haste /of rivers, in me...the oceans’ tireless / waiting”. (Sebastian et. al lines 46-48) She is very loud in expressing her sexuality and her desire for love. In “An introduction” she writes, “I am every woman who seeks love” (Sebastian et.al line 46) affirming her independence and the right to live her life. Kamala Das assertion of her sexuality and her strong refusal to fit into the societal expectations are examples of the postmodern rejection of authority and tradition. She is therefore challenging the patriarchal order and positioning her work as an act of resistance.

In the poem “My Grandmother’s House” too she writes openly and freely about desperate yearning to receive love. She writes “I who have lost/ My way and beg now at strangers’ doors to / Receive love, at least in small change.” (Das, lines 14-16) Matters like sexuality and desire for intimacy are shushed off in a traditional and conservative society. But she is bringing it out openly and freely in her poems defying the conventional boundaries of respectability and decency that often constrict women in Indian society.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality is another element of postmodern poetry. Kamala Das’s “An Introduction” can be considered as intertextual, as the poem embodies the literary traditions of both India and the west. In “An Introduction” Kamala Das re-imagined and re-contextualized traditional Indian cultural facets of marriage, motherhood and femininity through the modern rebellious lens. She rejected the traditional submissive, silent and passive roles of Indian woman. In the poem she writes, “It is time to/ Choose a name, a role” (Sebastian et.al lines 39-40) signaling urge to create a niche for herself in the society.

In the poem “My Grandmother’s House” the speaker is ready not ready to be shy and passive and wait for the love from her husband but break the glass ceiling and goes out to seek love outside her marriage which is a very bold step that she has taken is reflected as she writes, “My way and beg now at strangers’ door to / Receive love, at least in small change?” (Das, lines 15-16)

Use of Irony

Both the poems employ irony which is one of the important elements of post modern poetry. In “An Introduction” Kamala Das give an ironical stance on the presumed notion of the patriarchal society of politics being the domain of men. Men are considered superior than women in terms of intellect. Women are denied any role play in the society. She mocks at the nuance of men’s intellectual superiority over women when she writes in “An Introduction”, “I don’t know politics but I know the names/ Of those in power, and can repeat them like/ Days of week, or names of months, beginning with / Nehru”. (Sebastian et.al lines 1-4)

She also ridicules the concept of beauty accepted in the society, for instance, beauty is equated with fair skin. But when she writes in “An Introduction”, “I am Indian, very Brown” (Sebastian et.al line 4) she is very proud of her color. She is emphasizing her skin color using the adjective “very”. When she is embracing her skin color that is brown she is ironically challenging the whole concept of beauty accepted in the society.

In the poem “My Grandmother’s House” too Kamala Das uses irony. In the poem the speaker is not getting the acknowledgement, love and care from her husband. She is leading a miserable married life. She is begging for love. Her husband might have a misunderstanding that she has never receive love from anyone. In order prove it wrong. She writes, “...you cannot believe, darling, / can you, that I lived in such a house and/ was proud, and loved...” (Das, lines 12-14)

Conclusion

Both “An Introduction” and “My Grandmother’s House” witness Kamala Das’s mastery in using postmodern techniques to challenge and resist the established norms of the society. In “An Introduction,” Kamala Das’s use of fragmented structure, engagement of the speaker’s fluidity as well as the deconstruction of the gender norms supports the postmodern critiques of identity as something constructed and not fixed. Similarly, in “My Grandmother’s House” Das’s

reflected on the memory and lost reject the concept of stable and unchanging past which is a major concern for the postmodernist thinkers.

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