

The Identity - Crisis and the Feminist Consciousness in Mamta Kalia's Poetry: A Critical Assessment

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Abstract

This research paper intends to explore the Identity Crisis and the Feminist Consciousness in Mamta Kalia's Poetry. Mamta Kalia was born on 02 nd Nov. 1940 at Vrindavan U.P. She received her education in Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Nagpur and Indore. She happened to be the daughter of a learned father. She successfully completed her P.G. in English from Delhi University. Since 1973 she kept working as the Principal of S. Mahila Seva Sadan Degree College at Allahabad. She happened to be a competent poet, a great novelist, a short story - writer and a bilingualist having a very good command both in English and Hindi. She started her impactful literary writing in the years of 1980's . But today she is figuring out among the six best - known contemporary Indian Poets in English viz. Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, Dom Moraes, Kamala Das, Monika Verma, and Sunita Namjoshi. Her feminist consciousness is beautifully embedded in her poetry as a beloved and as a loving woman. A large number of her poems, drawn from her first volume, focus upon the romantic passion & earthly Love, while the majority of her poems from her second volume do highlight the dimension of the mutual adjustment in the conjugal relationship. She stands quite contrary to the many other female-poets in her approach to love and marriage, being a very significant and essential facet of feminine sensibility and consciousness. She is very honest, sincere and committed, while being ironical and satirical. For instance, in her first volume, she responded her rejection in terms of the romantic mode of passionate expression. She has denoted love as a relationship ironically evolving in a circle of common dislikes and hatreds, as in;

*How close we felt
discussing our dislikes,
sharing a few hatreds,
comparing notes about enemies.*

(Made for Each Other, 'Tribute to Papa and Other Poems, P. 15)

In her anxiety to stress the negative aspect of lacking true romantic idealism in sharing the experience of Love and marriage, she happens to neglect the positive aspects making that experience genuine for her.

In the second volume, irony results as a vital means of survival through the boredom and frustration caused by a constant love - relationship of many years in monotonous togetherness. For instance, she intends to search out the present in terms of the past in:

*My hair held a fragrance once.
A fragrance you associated with so many flowers,*

*Now when I lower my head
You only see dandruff and grey hair*

('My Hair Held a Fragrance Once' Poems, 18, p.25)

Such a feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration with the present seems to link up Mamta Kalia with Kamala Das. However it is very much notable and significant that, in the case of the former, it is resulting as the outcome of an experience of over-fulfillment, where as in the latter's case, it is resulting as the experience of dissatisfaction. Overfulfillment and unfulfillment -both remain as the poison of a healthy relationship. Mamta Kalia is very much strugglesome to define her identity as a serving poem in a few poems and female characters too are grappling hard with tough challenges in the patriarchal society, where a woman is underrated and undervalued, treated as a puppet, a sex-slave and a bed-partner, while maintaining her own identity and self-esteem, self-dependence, self-security and self-identity. Though some of her poems have a very strong autobiographical flavor, they interpret the phenomenon of an educated urban woman's exposure to society through employment. They found a strictly limited range of experience of a woman who is socially well-placed and does not have any emotional and social accidents. For instance, the poet articulates her impatience with social etiquettes and rebellious desire for a natural life in:

*I want to pick my nose,
in a public place
I want to sit in my office chair
with my feet up*

Thus her images are derived, mainly from her life as a middle-class housewife and as the principal of a college. She remains as the leading voice of a few distinguished female poets whose expression is colloquial, satirical, ironical and realistic.

Keywords:

Identity-crisis, Feminist consciousness, competent, bilingualist, impactful, mutual adjustment, conjugal, boredom, patriarchal, self-esteem, self-identity, self-security etc.

This research-paper dwells upon exploring the idea of identity-crisis and the feminist consciousness in Mamta Kalia's poetry. She is the representative of contemporary Indian-English poetry. She raised her voices as a victim of her poetry against the female exploitation, verbal harassment and humiliation done to the females in this patriarchal system. Almost her work is done by the other Indian English female poets such as Kamala Das, Sarojini Naidu, Toru Dutt and Gauri Deshpande.

Before we proceed to Mamta Kalia's poetry having the fragrance of the feminine sensibility and identity-crisis, it is very much significant to deal with the investigation of psychology, psychoanalysis, and sociology.

The distinction between "feminine" and "masculine" from the points of view of psychology, psychoanalysis, and sociology emphasizes the need for a critical approach to poetry by women as an independent phenomenon. The Position of Indian women and the development of their poetic psyche provides as essential basis for the study of the Indian feminine psyche's contribution to Indian poetry in English divided into four categories—the Romantics, the New Romantics, the Moderns, and the New Poets. The transplantation of Indian women poets from abroad to Indian Culture, because of their being wedded to Indians leads to their grouping over category "Outsider-Insider".

The survey introduces each poem with a biographical sketch. The detailed thematic and stylistic analysis of the poet's works is illustrated through a critical appreciation of one of her poems that represents her poetic ability. It includes -Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu (The first Romantics), Sabita Dev, Sister Lalitha, Bharti Sarabhai, Sushila Rao (The Later Romantics), Monika Verma, Mary Erukar, Indira Devi Dhanrajgir (The New Romantics). Roshen Alkazi, Tapti Mookerji, Leela Dharmaraj, Kamala Das (The Moderns), Mamta Kalia, Sunita Namjoshi, Gauri Deshpande, Tillottama Rajan, Shree Devi Singh (The New Poets), and Lila Ray, Margaret Chatterjee and Mary Ann Dasgupta (The outsider - insiders).

A study of Indian women poets in English demands, at the outset, a clarification of a few challenging issues related to it. The very term 'women poets' implies an attempt to isolate 'women poets' from 'men poets', and consider them in a group only on the ground of sex and gender. This inevitably raises the question where there is anything like 'feminine sensibility' or 'feminist consciousness'. This question needs to be answered with reference to psychology and psychoanalysis on the one hand, and to sociology on the other. It will then be necessary to consider some characteristics of the 'Indian' feminist consciousness or feminine sensibility that would comprise a brief assessment of the changing face of females in the social and cultural evolution of India.

Psychology deals with the concepts of the feminine and the masculine from the biological as well as psychological points of view. The investigations about the behavior of animals regarding sex, child-bearing and the care of the young in particular, the biological differences between males and females. Maslow speaks of male-superiority in size and strength among monkeys, whereas Yerkes observes a general tendency in the male chimpanzee to lead and control, and in the female to follow and assume a subordinate role. The experiments of Kinder and others done on the albino rats and of Avery and others on guinea-pigs display that nest-building and care of the young are the specific biological functions of the female. The general biological differences between males and females are confirmed by the later psychologists such as Tinbergen, Schaler and Moswatt. They provide a basis for similar sex-differences among humans. Ford finds men transculturally the more dominant, aggressive, and sexually more active and women - the more expressive, submissive, possessive, tolerant and nurturant.

Besides all these biological differences, there are well-established sex-differences in several mental abilities. Masculinity and femininity are, in view of Terman and Miles - "important aspects of woman personality... The masculinity-femininity contrast is probably as deeply-grounded, whether by nature or by nature, as any other which human temperament presents."¹

According to the results of attitude-interest analysis of M-F test, males have greater self-assertion and aggressiveness, more hardness and fearlessness and more roughness of manners, language and sentiments. On the other hand, the females are in general more compassionate and sympathetic, more timid, more fastidious and aesthetically sensitive and more emotional.

In her survey of literature about gender and sex differences, Anne Anastasi reports that "a greater degree of awareness, achievement drive and emotional drive"² are found to characterize the female.

Seward, for instance argues, "Differences at the psychological level..... are largely the products of our culture and reflect roles assigned to the two sexes"³

Like psychologists, the leading psychoanalysts who have rendered their significant contribution to the deeper study of the feminine and the masculine traits. Freud regards femininity as a biological phenomenon and studies in the light of the standards represented by masculinity. Freud thus claims women "as weaker in their instincts than men".⁴

¹ Quoted by Viola Klein in her-The Feminine Character(London Kegan Paul,Trench,Trumber and Co. Ltd.,1946) P.108

² Anne ,Anastasi, Differential Psychology (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937, 14th Printing, 1971)P.46

³ Georgene H. Seward , Sex and Social order (Penguin Books, first ed. 1946, Pellican ed. 1954)P.218

⁴ Sigmund Freud: The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, translated and edited by James Strachey (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., First ed., 1916, Present ed. 1971) P.598

Carl Jung, on the other hand, accepts the inner unity of the self, and reinterprets the feminine and the masculine as the complementary phenomena. He calls the feminine archetype within man's collective unconscious "anima" and the masculine archetype within woman's "animus".

Carl Jung holds the idea — "Just as the man is compensated by a feminine element (the anima), so woman is compensated by a masculine one ... her unconscious has, so to speak, a masculine imprint. This results in a considerable psychological difference between men and women."⁵

Sociology renders more significant insights into the nature of femininity, as it interconnects sex-differences in abilities, temperament and motives with the sex-roles in society. Sociologists attempt to go through the position of women in different societies of the world from a historical point of view in order to gain a clear idea about the 'feminist' character in a particular social context. They find that subordination to men is one of the common factors of a woman's position in the social history of a number of communities. The general condition of woman in society in various parts of the world is summarized in Encyclopedia of Social Sciences thus - "The core of social structure, the closely knit patriarchal family in which property was transmitted through the male line, institutionalized the dominance of men over women".⁶

Post-colonial period did enlighten the female writers to be conscious of maintaining their identity and scattering the fragrance of their feminist consciousness in an age of rootlessness, displacement, unjust patriarchy, gender-discrimination and the sexual exploitation. The contemporary leading poets of Indian English literature did realize very sensitively that women are not merely "man's mirror"⁷ and, therefore, they challenged the old patriarchal conventions based on gender-discrimination and male-superiority. The contemporary leading poets such as Kamla Das, Mamta Kalia, Gauri Deshpande and Sujata Bhatt etc. had to come across some tough challenges and a variety of tensions in this age which "stimulates their psyche's progress from tradition to modernity."⁸

Their struggle for a new identity and their conscious and active participation in life around has added a new dimension to their writings. Social discrimination, male-oppression, self-realization and consequent evolution of the feminist consciousness are some of the challenging themes in their writings. Mamta Kalia's poetry contains their background and her writings reveal not merely self-expression but are a means of self-exploration and self-assertion.

⁵ C.G. Jung, *Aion*, Translated by R.F.C. Hull (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959) P.14

⁶ R.A. Seligman, Alvin Johnson (eds), *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 15 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935, 14th Printing, 1962) P. 442

⁷ Luce, Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, Trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1985, P.171

⁸ Sunanda P., Chavan, *The Fair Voice: A Study of Indian Women Poets*; New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1984, P.9-10

Here the comment of Bruce King seems to be quite relevant, "the present contemporary manner appears to have been initiated by Mamta Kalia, who explored the themes, attitudes, voices and registers of speech which have been taken further by De Souza and Silgado."⁹

Like Kamla Das, Mamta Kalia too completely disregarded the romantic idealist tradition of the Pre-independence female poets and rather did render a quite realistic and the concrete reflection of the life-experiences, particularly in the ambit of man-woman relationship in the patriarchal Indian society. Most of her poems are loaded with ironic effusions about pains and sufferings of unrealized love, break-ups and humiliations of the matrimonial life, oppression and injustice of the patriarchy and suppression of identity and injustice of the patriarchy and suppression of identity.

Mamta Kalia stands very much similar to the group of the two leading contemporary woman-poets comprising Eunice de Souza and Dharker who tend to raise their protest and rebellion against the patriarchy for the maintenance of their own identity and survival in the Hindu community. After Kamla Das, she happens to be the only dominant woman-poet (P.155) who has published the two verse-volumes titled — A Tribute to Papa and other Poems (1970) and Poems '78 (1978).

Like her fellow-poets such as Kamla Das, Gauri Deshpande and Mamta Kalia too remains very much straightforward in her feminist consciousness as beautifully reflected in her poems. She wishes to share her life-experiences of love, marriage, family and society in a very flexible, direct and colloquial manner with touching irony and sarcasm. In the opening poems titled — "Tribute to Papa", there occurs a sense of revolt and rebellion in her statements when she openly challenges her father who had no guts but satirically imagines that — "*you had guts, Papa, to smuggle eighty thousand watches at a stroke, I would be proud of you then.*"¹⁰

As a very conscious woman, she criticizes and satirizes the passiveness of her father, who instead of confronting the challenges of life, starts spending his time in the worship of God like any other middle class man of our Hindu society.

Born and brought up in such a kind of religion, unlike Dharker, Kalia puts attacks on the hypocrisy of her own Hindu religion which has made people superstitious, impotent and passive.

"When you can't think of doing anything

You start praying,

⁹ Bruce King, Modern Indian Poetry in English, New Delhi, O.U.P.

¹⁰ Mamta Kalia, A Tribute to Papa and Other Poems, Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1970 (All citations in the body of the text refer to this edition)

*Spending useless hours at the temple."*¹¹

Further, she fails to resist her sense of revolt against patriarchy, and keeps asking some irrelevant questions from her father in an ironical tone. While dismantling the dominance of patriarchy, she appears to expose her own identity and feminist consciousness to secure her self-identity having the manly valour.

"I want me to be like you, Papa,

Or like Rani Lakshmibai.

You are not sure what greatness is,

*But you want me to be great."*¹²

She scatters the odour of the another shade of her feminist consciousness searching out her own identity. She intentionally attacks the conservative and faulty face of love and marriage in the patriarchal set-up. Though she is very much liberal and flexible in her approaches towards love and marriage. She finds it too tough and difficult for her to challenge and protest the commands or sentiments of her conservative father believing in the old traditions and conventions. While protesting the patriarchal standard, she speaks very much candidly and adventurously.

" Everything about you clashes with

Nearly everything about me .

You suspect I am having a love-affair these days,

But you are too shy to have it confirmed .

What if, tummy, starts showing gradually

*And I refuse to have it curetted ?"*¹³

Mamta Kalia brings about a demolition of the patriarchal set-up. She happens to reverse the romanticizing and idealizing idiom of the 19th C. Indian English women poets. She figures out as a rebel and protester not only to men's dominance over women but also to women's acceptance of men's dominance. Her poem — "Tribute to Papa", does provide a poetic flavor with her own identity-crisis and the feminist consciousness.

"Who cares for you, Papa?

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

Who cares for your clean thoughts, clean words, clean teeth?

Who wants to be an angel like you?

Who wants it?"¹⁴

Therefore, male-exploitation of women's body, man's appropriation of women's body and man's hypocrisy about the whole affair are exposed with challenging defiance and devastating satire. She reveals the lust of man in the most subversive manner in the small poem, "Sheer Good Luck",

"I could have been kidnapped

At the age of seven,

And ravaged by

Dirty-minded middle aged men"¹⁵

What Simone De Beauvoir debated about the position of woman is appropriate in the male-dominated culture — "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being."¹⁶

In the second collection of her poems titled Poems '78, Kalia represents herself to more radical, progressive, revolutionary, experimental, reactionary and vocal against the patriarchy. Her rebellious reaction becomes much more apparent when she is striving to explore her own identity lost somewhere in the muddle of race, sex and gender as done by Meena Alexander in her Fault Lines. In a small but significant poem titled "I am a great fool", Kalia displays her dissatisfaction in the marital relationship where she finds the conjugal relationship hazardous in keeping love alive. She completely disregards the traditional patriarchal set up of marriage where a woman is getting underrated, undervalued, exploited sexually, mentally harassed and financially frustrated down crying loudly in the impression of disillusionment and bewilderment, comments:

I am a great fool,

To think that marriage is bliss,

Was it last month or last year,

That we exchanged a Kiss,¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Simone De, Beauvoir, The Second Sex, Trans. H.M. Parshley, New Delhi: Alfred A Knof, 1970 P.18

¹⁷ Mamta Kalia, Poems '78, Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1978 (Citations in the text refer to this edition)

Most of the feminist poets including Kamla Das, Gauri Deshpande, Meena Alexander and Sujata Bhatt have criticized the role of husband in the Indian families in the patriarchal society. Mamta Kalia seems to be more critical against the role of the husband in her personal life and strongly opposes the male's habit of suppressing, harassing, exploiting and discriminating woman at every step in life. This is a very fine impact of her feminist consciousness and self-identity. She expresses her misandry in the poem -

"Love Made a Housewife out of Me",

"Love made a housewife out of me

I came with a degree in Textile Designing

Skill in debates, dramatics and games.....

You don't realize

You don't sympathize"¹⁸

In this context, Kate Millet's observation that the equation of knowledge with power results in the-

"fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes on Women"¹⁹ is very relevant, keeping in view the behavior of her husband.

In this regard, the comment of Homi Bhabha looks very much relevant. He comments at the tongue war between husband and wife, a male and a female as the discovery of ____ "difference of genders which does not neatly map onto the private and the public, but becomes disturbingly supplementary to them"²⁰

Thus it can be very briefly concluded to say on the ground of the above discussion that Mamta Kalia has very impressively sprinkled out her feminist consciousness on the path of exploring her own identity, her own freedom and her own love and respect in the defective patriarchal set-up of the Indian families. She has also attacked the futility and hollowness of the conservative tradition and conventions of the phallogocentric fabric of the society. Like Kamla Das, she too slams and blames patriarchy for woman's exploitation and marginalization from the mainstream of life. Thus being a woman, she much better understands the pains, sentiments and sufferings of a woman. She projects a very powerful image of a woman who can compete with man in every walk of life.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Kate, Millet, Sexual Politics, London: Sphere Books, 1971

²⁰ Homi, K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture, London: Routledge, 1994

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