

Narratology of Subjugation in Select Works of two Female poets**Sanjoy Das**

Research Scholar

PhD in English

Dibrugarh University

Dibrugarh, Assam

Dr. Madhumita Purkayastha

Supervisor

Associate Professor & Head

Dept. of English, DHSK College

Dibrugarh, Assam

Abstract

Women subjugation is a universal phenomenon transcending all limitations of time and space. In a patriarchal and male-dominated society, women have always been subjected to discrimination, marginalisation and unspeakable torture. Those who are more or less subdued and subversive in nature do not give a sharp reaction to male hegemony but those who are more concerned with their respective identity and position, challenge the male centric world view more boldly and radically. Keeping this perspective in view, the proposed article aims to look at the emergence of women empowerment across time and space and to trace the gradual shift developed in the notions of feminism as reflected in two famous poems namely Anne Bradstreet's *The Prologue* and Kamala Das' *An Introduction*. The article intends to shed light on two aspects of feminism: Bradstreet's challenging the societal norms silently against Kamala Das' revolutionary stance of asserting women's rights boldly. It explores the politics of subjugation vis-à-vis biology, language as well as cultural distinctiveness along with the commonalities of exploitation, deprivation in both white and non-white women adopting the feminist framework as propounded by Kate Millet in 'Sexual Politics.' In formulating the substance of the proposed article, a close reading of the text along with secondary sources in the form of relevant books, journals, articles, website etc. have been done.

Keywords: subjugation, identity, feminism, patriarchy

Introduction

Feminism is a recent literary phenomenon and generally centres on women's struggle for equality and emancipation of rights. It is basically concerned with women's marginalised position in society, discrimination faced by them because of the patriarchal culture and way of their emancipation. It involves political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. The literary feminism too deals with cultural, economic, educational and social inequalities of women in the male dominated society and the writers of feminism deal with the problems of women from female point of view.

There are number of earliest practitioners of feminism like Mary Wollstonecraft, J.S. Mill, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet etc. who raised voices against the most prevalent and dominant male phallocentric ideologies, patriarchal attitudes and male interpretations in literature and also sought more equality and freedom for women. All these feminist theorists advocated emancipation and equal status for women in the male dominated society.

The proposed paper focusses on two significant poems: Anne Bradstreet's 'The Prologue' and Kamala Das' 'An Introduction'. 'The Prologue' is a satirical poem about the patriarchal society of Puritans which emphasises the struggles and subjugation of women in spite of their talent and creativity. It is a kind of cry against the patriarchal and male dominated society. The poem throws light on the theme of social discrimination and gender biasness. The awful condition that women had to go through while being involved in the household chores and not getting recognition for their worldwide talent was what forms the crux of the poem. The poem also deals with the theme of humility. The poet believes that one should be humble. She had shown this humbleness despite proving her calibre of penning down wonderful lines of poetry from the first stanza itself. Bradstreet did not directly censure the male centric world order but rather opposed to it silently and passively. In an intelligent and silent way, she challenged the male hegemony in the domain of literature. She did not want to subvert the male supremacy but favoured some appreciation and recognition of her poetic abilities. In contrast, Kamala Das introduces a new trend in Indian poetry in English with her bold, original and concentrated approach to the theme of love, language, sex and self-identity. Her poem, 'An Introduction' is an autobiographical verse that throws light on the life of a woman in the patriarchal society. It explores a range of themes like identity, language, patriarchy and freedom and thus can be read as a powerful statement of individual and collective identity, as well as a call to action for those who are struggling for freedom and equality. She as a radical feminist challenged the very dominance of male culture by not adhering to the social and cultural norms of the patriarchal society.

While dealing with the issue of subjugation in the select poems, the feminist framework as proposed by Kate Millet in 'Sexual Politics' is taken into consideration. According to her, 'The term "Politics" shall refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another.' (Millet, 55) She argues that power always operates within sexual relationships and thus builds an argument that the relationship between the sexes is a political issue revolving around the dominance of one group by another. In 'The Prologue' the poet states that she was not suggested to compose lines of poetry, rather advised by the male patriarch to engage in domestic chores. The societal norms of the day did not permit women to take up pen and involve in creative activity. That is why, Bradstreet had not wished to publish her poem during her lifetime. She

is kind of poet, who may be put under the first phase of feminism who in the words of Kate Millet, failed to overthrow patriarchal rule and change the psychological foundations of traditional sex roles. The other poem 'An Introduction' contains a challenging tome from the very first line. Kamala Das here undertakes a scathing criticism on male members of the society. The male dominated society imposes various norms of culture on her but she instead of following their dictates vehemently opposes to their way of subjugation. In 'Sexual Politics' Kate Millet says, "It is interesting that many women do not recognise themselves as discriminated against; no better proof could be found of the totality of their conditioning." (Millet, 55) However, in 'An Introduction' Kamala Das, the poet explores powerful themes of feminism like equal rights, freedom and marriage. It is a very clear feminist statement that advocates for free choice for all women. The poet is well aware of all kinds of discrimination imposed by the male members and hence he uses a voice that is very clear, direct, sharp and unhesitant. On the other hand, the speaker in 'The Prologue' seems to be conscious of discrimination and belittlement. But she rallies against males in a humble way and pleads to them to give some words of acknowledgement and appreciation.

Objectives of the paper

The aims and objectives of the paper are:

1. To look at the emergence of women empowerment across time and space. There is gradual shift developed in the notions of feminism as reflected in the select poems.
2. To shed light on two aspects of feminism: Bradstreet's challenging the societal norms silently against Kamala Das' revolutionary stance of asserting women's rights boldly.
3. To study politics of subjugation vis-à-vis biology, language as well as cultural distinctiveness.
4. To highlight the commonalities of exploitation, deprivation in both white and non-white women. Women of all sections of the society irrespective of their class, race are subjects of atrocities and degradation.

Interpretation

Anne Bradstreet and Kamala Das come from two different annals of time and geographical locations. Bradstreet, one of the earliest female writers of New England territory, was born in England in a puritan society and later on immigrated to America with her family members to settle there permanently. As a strict puritan family member, women were conditioned to follow certain code of conducts and hence she like other women of the time was expected to stay indoors, to take care of children after marriage and to be at beck and call of their husbands. However, Bradstreet was fortunate enough to have a supportive family that facilitates her to pursue her intellectual desires. She was educated at home and was exposed to large collection of books at father's library. Later on, she started writing poetry and became a devout Christian and Puritan poetess. Among other poems. 'The Prologue' is a superb illustration of women's rights and identity albeit in a nascent way.

The Prologue (1650): Text analysis

'The Prologue' as the title suggests, is the initiation of some noble venture that deals with two important notions: the poet's confession about her inferior feminist poetic identity and a sense of humility. At the very beginning of the poem, she uses a set of lexical terms and

expressions that stands for a low-esteemed character and an underestimated self. She confesses that she is a lowly poet who does not possess the skill or proficiency like great historians, poets and critics to write about great topics and themes. Contrary to popular belief about feminist standpoints, she takes up a liberal stance who writes some 'obscure lines' with his 'mean pen'. She admits that she only acts in accordance with the humble limits and space assigned to her, unlike the great Bartas who was a courtier, poet and a doctor of law at that time. After repeatedly confessing her humble potential in comparison with that of men, one feels that she had been serious in depicting the current literary submissiveness and humility she, among other women, suffered from. However, at the deeper level, there is a sense of self identity which makes her not to feel jealous from Bartas but to depend on her own poetic abilities. In another metaphor, she blames those who expect much from her pen when they are fully cognizant that her skill is very humble like an immature school boy. As she comes to blame nature, she accuses the biology of women as being the major reason for the state of submissiveness as if such qualities were inherited and can never be repaired. The linguistic choice of expressions essentially supports the idea that women's disempowered potentials were attributed to genetic and biological factors originated by the nature of their gender. The sorrow and hopelessness readers feel in the last two verses in the stanza support the previous argument of a feminist poet who, despite the empowerment given to her, insists on underestimating her poetic career, thus reflecting negatively on a whole generation who had suffered a lot from being unable to speak up nor to make their voices heard. She alludes the case of Greek orator Demosthenes who overcame his speech impediment by dint of skill and practice. But, she on her part was unsure to achieve success because of certain physical and biological defects in her brain. However, the following lines qualify her as a different person at all. She expresses her anger and dissatisfaction with men who underestimates women's distinction and excellence through these lines:

"I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits.
A Poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
For such despite they cast on female wits."

(Bradstreet, lines 25-28)

Here, she abdicates her previous state of humility and speaks more boldly against her accusers, by saying that she abhors whoever belittles her and/or their female wits by claiming they only fit to serve in domestic spheres e.g. sewing and kitchen. She not only criticizes her accusers but she hints at the embedded 'female wits' that she never mentioned previously. She apparently depends on "female wits" to prove to the other that she brilliantly meets the demands of any positions she aspires to if given a chance e.g. writing poetry, rather than only being assigned to domestic roles in the kitchen and babysitting. Thus, there is a gradual shift of her position where she goes from seeking acknowledgment and recognition for women's canonical works into refuting man's own definition of them. Later, in the poem, she openly blames her accusers for underestimating women's canonical works in the name of gender and social roles. She rejects the way they look down at women's prodigal literary talents. Being 'obnoxious' to her accusers is another form of empowerment as she explicitly loathes those who underestimate and/or strip her off her feminist poetic traditions. The succeeding lines differ in tone and language. She moves from the state of belittlement and humility into the state of criticism. She openly criticises the ancient Greeks who were not cognizant of the

other sex, dedicating the nine Muses for their male services rather than serving their female partners. Towards the end of the poem, she decides that despite all her criticism of the Greeks and her male opponents, she confesses that the Greeks should maintain their current precedent status and their superiority. In other words, she grants men their dominance, superiority and authority but to grant her acknowledgement in return. Here seeking acknowledgement stems from a powerful and self-confident persona. Bradstreet explicitly assures her readers that her writings are not intended to challenge men's wits or their precedency; rather, they are intended to prove that whatever may succeed in her verse is not either by chance or plagiarism. The acknowledgement Bradstreet seeks recurs the theme of smart submissiveness which eventually helps women speak up and make their voices heard. In those days there was no such movements called feminism and women never dreamt of putting up their individual identity in front of male-centric society. Anne Bradstreet's poems, though she did not want to be published, brought a new kind of herald in the uplift of women's voices and paved the way for the succeeding writers to fight more vigorously against the male dominated patriarchal set-up.

An Introduction (1973): Text analysis

Kamala Das is one of the pioneers of feminism sensibility in Indian English poetry. With the advent of her, women poetry takes a sudden turn and starts dealing with issues of feminine sensibility, women's exploitation, sufferings and suppression of day-to-day life. In her poetry, she is intensely conscious of herself as a woman. Her poetry is confessional and autobiographical but at times it has universal appeal too. 'An Introduction' is an autobiographical and confessional poem in tone. Included in 'The Old Playhouse and Other Poems' (1973), the poem reveals a gender bias and the poet's assertion in favour of living spontaneously in her own way. It presents the truthful picture of her life, her emotions of love and sex, her revolutionary attitude against the callous and cruel patriarchy and her bold pleading for feminism.

The poem opens with the poet's introducing herself as an innocent girl entirely ignorant of the ways of the world. The poem begins with assertion:

"I don't know politics, but I know the names

Of those in power..."

(Das, lines 1-2)

When she grows up, further tension begins. First of all, her right to choose any language she likes. She has great fascination for the English language. But her family members ask her not to use it. She is fed up with such types of restriction imposed by the patriarchal domination. She boldly resents and refuses this restriction on her freedom of expression and her identity. This is the earliest reaction of her identity. In the second stage, when she attains puberty and adolescence, the patriarchy of her family gets her married. She gets married early and instead of love and freedom she receives sexual exploitation and humiliation. Later on, too, she has to live in restriction posed by the conservative male dominated society. She is compelled to accept the traditional feminine role as a girl, housewife, a cook, a quarreller and so on. She rebels against such womanliness:

"...Dress in saris, be girl

Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook

Be a quarreller with servants..."

(Das, lines 33-35)

A woman in Indian society is always instructed to observe the well-established norms of the male dominated family. The poet realises that her experiences are the experiences of every woman who are devoid of love and liberty. The conventional society instructs her to: 'Be Amy, or be Kamla, or better / Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to/ Choose a name'. (Das, lines 38-40) Kate Millet's statement in 'Sexual Politics' is quite pertinent here when she says:

"Their chattel status continues in their loss of name, their obligation to adopt the husband's domicile, and the general legal assumption that marriage involves an exchange of the female's domestic service and (sexual) consortium in return for financial support." (Millet)

The society in which Kamala Das was living, determines the living style of women. It interrogates any deviant role of women and makes them to lose their self-identity. It makes her rebellious and she boldly and frankly asserts:

"... I met a man, loved him, call

Him not by any name, he is every man,

Who wants a woman, just as I am every

Woman who seeks love..."

(Das, lines 43-46)

The concluding lines of the poem records the poet's longing for autonomy and a woman's identity. She asserts her determination to live spontaneously a life of passions and emotions and wants to be herself and live her life:

"I have no joys which are not yours, no

Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I."

(Das, lines 58-59)

Thus, the poem asserts the feminine individuality, identity and freedom. Kamala Das here is shown rebelling against the exploitation of women in a male made world and opposes all well-established conventions and norms of the society, which are meant to exploit womankind.

Findings

'The Prologue' and 'An Introduction' by Anne Bradstreet and Kamala Das respectively depict two different shades of feminism. The earliest work of feminist philosophy was 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft and as a movement, feminism was supposed to have been started in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century though the term was first coined in 1837 by French philosopher Charles Fourier. Bradstreet's 'The Prologue' was published way back in 1650 when feminist issues of emancipation were not felt seriously at all. Nevertheless, Bradstreet was able to advance her feministic ideas through her writings. The poem basically speaks about Bradstreet's struggles of being a woman within a Puritan society and while dealing with this issue, the poet also silently breaks and criticises societal code of conduct prescribed by the patriarchy system. Unlike modern feminist writers, Bradstreet had always sought to deliver his feminist message through self-effacement due to women's oppressed status within the Puritan American culture. She did not directly challenge the societal norms but reacted sharply and intelligently

against cultural imposition of men. In contrast, Kamala Das directly rebels against patriarchy and strives to secure an identity for women in the society. She asserts the rights and freedom of women in a defiant manner. Her poem 'An Introduction' is a strong statement made on gender differences and a move to transcend the socially imposed restrictions by yearning for individual love and freedom.

The two poems demonstrate the subjugation of women vis-à-vis biological, linguistic and cultural factors. In 'The Prologue' the poet ironically states that her pen is 'mean' to deal with grand themes or subjects. The male commentators and the custodians of the societal culture always encouraged a woman to do the needle work instead of establishing self-individuality in the society. The poet, as a part of self-effacement of her poetic qualities, also underestimates her lines of expression. She considers that her language of poetic expression is very obscure and can in fact devalue and degrade the loftiness or worth of a grand theme. In terms of biological factors, the poet admits that she is not perfect as her Muse of poetry is 'foolish, broken and blemished'. She possesses 'wond'ring eyes and envious heart'. She is not mature enough as she has 'school-boy's tongue' from where melodious and perfected lines can not be expected.

In 'An Introduction', Kamala Das utters the concerns of a woman trapped in societal roles. When she says that she does not know politics, it refers to women's non-existent participation in the affairs of the state. Women were not considered fit to enter the domain of politics rather encouraged to stay indoors. The culture of the society formulated by the male members always instructs women to dress like a respectable woman and fit into the socially acceptable roles of woman, i.e. a wife, or a mother who only cooks in the kitchen or gets confined to the domestic routine. As regards the use of language, the male patriarch also impedes women's freedom of expression in any language that they like. In this poem, the poet makes a defiant assertion of her right to choose any language she likes for her expressing her 'self'. In response to the suggestions that she should not write in English, but should follow her mother tongue, she says that English is her choice of expression and she calls it as her own with all its distortions and strangeness. From the issue of the politics of language, the poet proceeds to the sexual politics. The images of swelling limbs, growing hairs, the sad and pitiful weight of breasts and womb, and the sad woman's body brings in the dark side of women's experience because of her body. She recalls the unconscious terrors of her childhood and associates with the violent movements of trees, figures of clouds, the thundering of storms or rains that falls heavily and the 'incoherent mutterings of the blazing funeral pyre' with the masculine violence. She has suffered so much that she said she hated being a woman. She wrote "then I wore a shirt and my/Brother's trousers, cut my hair short, and ignored/My womanliness." (Das, lines 31-33) Kamala Das asserts that if a woman, by impulse, defies the gender code prescribed by the society and dresses up as a man or 'sits on the wall', she is subjected to humiliation. Indeed, women were not provided any liberty to lead their own life. In matters of marriage also, a woman is forced to marry a man at a tender age without understanding the concept of marriage. Consequently, the marriage could only traumatise and torture her female body while the man asserts their power and authority.

The speakers of both poems narrate their personal stories in first person point of view. They share the lived experiences of their life which exemplify the plight of women at that point of time. Since ages, women irrespective of their colour, race and identity have been discriminated, subjugated. Anne Bradstreet belonged to the White Puritan community but still bore the brunt of discriminatory practices and policies. Male sections of the society used to impose several cultural norms on women and exploit them regardless of their colour. Kamala

Das who hails from India and is an outstanding poetic genius also suffers from the same colour discrimination and biasness. 'An Introduction', which is written in first person perspective, portrays the male dominance and prevalence in an Indian society very sarcastically. But instead of being bullied and tamed, she stood very tall and raised voices against all injustices of the male dominant society.

Conclusion

To sum up, we can quote another statement of Kate Millet when she says, "Because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different." (Millet) The proposed paper illustrated these two aspects of social structure in the poems where different set of cultural norms are made for male and female. As poems of feminists' colour, the select poems present a different kind of life experience of the female who are always dictated and guided by her male counterpart. The poems showed dichotomous relationship between man and woman in terms of cultural, linguistic and physiological factors. Irrespective of their location, colour, and status in the society, women's plights have been in most cases uniform across ages. No doubt both poets have attempted to be vocal and reach out to the larger masses by becoming writers. They took up writing and make a humble attempt to establish their individuality and identity and ensure equal rights in the so-called male dominated society. While addressing this larger issue of women's rights and identities, Kamala Das has been very expressive and dominant whereas Anne Bradstreet remains a silent speaker without posing a great threat to male superiority. Still Bradstreet has also created her intellectual space and thus has proved to be influential poetic genius in American puritan society. In that way, both poets have carved a special niche in the context of the feminist discourse over the period of time and have contributed a lot to explore for the future writers.

Works Cited

- Bradstreet, A. The Complete Works of Anne Bradstreet, edited by Joseph R. McEllrath, Jr. and Robb A.P. Boston: Twayne Publishers. 1981.
- Bruce, Susan. "Anne Bradstreet and the Seventeenth-century Articulation of 'the female voice'." *Feminist Moments: Reading Feminist Texts*, edited by Katherine Smits and Susan Bruce Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, pp 19-26.
- Das, Kamala. "An Introduction" Poems Old and New, edited by Forum for English studies, Dibrugarh University, Macmillan India Ltd. 2001 pp 177-178
- Iyenger, KR Srinivasa: Indian Writing in English, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1962.
- Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. 1st Ballantine Books ed. Ballantine, 1978
- Sarma, Hemanta. "Feminist Assertions in Kamala Das: A Study of 'An Introduction' & 'The Sunshine Cat'." *Indian Journal of Applied Research* vol. 6, no. 8, August 2016.