

Feminism and Indian response to Kamala Das' Alphabet of Lust

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ABSTRACT

Indian society has been a little biased when it comes to women. Though the situation has changed over the period of time, but this change is still very slow. Writers observe everything very closely and describe the same in their work. They are the link between the old and the new generation as people die, but their work remains. People today can understand the development of culture and mindset, changing with every generation. Kamala Das is one such writer whose work has been studied again and again from people of different generations and ages. In her novel Alphabet of Lust she has described the feelings of womanhood and expresses her physical desires which were a taboo at that time. Her writing was appreciated by one who could relate with her and was highly condemned by the ones who found it disgraceful. She never cared about the response on her writing and was candid and honest in expressing herself. As a writer she believed that, it is her responsibility to let her readers know about her observations without putting any filter. This paper would talk about the Indian readers' response to her novel Alphabet of Lust.

Keywords: Lust, culture, Sexuality, Feminism, Critics

Kamala Das (1934-2009) has been perceived as a feminist writer whose work is biased towards women. Through her novel *Alphabet of Lust*, she has proved her feministic persona which will be investigated on the context of the highlighted subject. Before discussing her book we should know about her life struggles which inspired her writings. She was one of the most eminent feminist authors in the independent India. As a bilingual writer she has published several works of fictions in Malayam under the pen name of **Madhavikutty**. She also has an autobiography, a novel, and has collections of short stories to her credit in English. Kamala Das cleared the space for Indian English women poets going bravely where no women had been before, into the terrain of sexuality. On account of her extensive contribution to the poetry in our country, she earned the name 'The Mother of Modern Indian English poetry'. Though her writings highlight variety in her topics, her maximum focus was in the creation of women character. Her women characters fulfil the rich imagination of social monotones in one hand; on the other hand they are political and vocal about women persona. In an interview, Usha Kishore after reading her book *Alphabet of Lust* said that:

“.... For Kamala’s writing very much spoke of the lived experience in our times. Her poems and stories capture moments that are always in the making. This is where her playfulness comes. Her poems and stories are threshold experiences. She played on the edge and so was way ahead of her times and critics.” [1]

Her fascination with writing began at a young age while watching her elders immersed in their work. When she was as young as six, she started a manuscript magazine where she would write ‘sad poems about dolls and with the passing of time when she was grown up, she tried to make shows on theatre on the plays of Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables* to Kalidas. In her book Kamala Das says that:

“The only secrets I always withhold are that I am so alone and that I miss my Grandmother.” [1]

Kamal Das was married at her tender age when she was just 15 and was brought to Mumbai as her husband Madhava Das was an employee in Reserve Bank of India. Being a married woman she had to take the family duties, as a wife and a mother and it was very hard job to find a spare time for her love for writing. Nevertheless, she pursued her passion for writing. In her poems she tried to emphasize a certain kind of voice for the generation of women who were confined to their households, and considered a commodity to be exchanged through marriage. She has portrayed that women must know the needs of men, not as the social human being but as the womankind, who are full of desires, pain and emotions just like men. She has described her women who are isolated in a male dominated society. In her every female dominating work from the poem to short stories, her female characters are just like fire of ball both in the sexual context and in shrewdness. In his research Anisur Rahman stated that:

“Her poetry has been subjected to certain stock responses ever since 1960s- that is when her work started gaining critical attention. All these responses have been based on the critical readings of Das in her various avatars as a love poet and a feminist poet. Although it is difficult to keep these identities separate from one another, some critics have tried to do so and have read her poetry along a given line, while others have tried to take a holistic view by referring to her various identities cumulatively.” [2]

Alphabet of Lust is a complete novel in English by Kamala Das. It is a novel in which humour, irony and exaggeration to expose and criticise the stupidity of Indian society have been narrated superbly, where men are criticized for their excessive passion for lust. The main character of the novel is a poet Manasi, a character of good creation of feminism. She has a daughter Suparna, who is studying in a collage at Lucknow. Her husband is an exploited government employee and she is an unhappy wife. Another character, Vijay Raje is a minister in the state Government, a thoroughly corrupt and lustful personality. His hands are long up to the Prime Minister. When he expresses his sexual intention to Manasi, she readily concedes to him and uses him to win the coveted national award of Padmashri. Manasi uses Vijay Raje as a ladder to reach to Prime Minister, another lustful widower. She applies her sexual card with the Prime Minister and ascends the success as a cabinet minister. Kamala Das expresses her feministic views through her character Manasi. She proves how the male falls in weak situation while sex and lust can ultimately lead to the negative results. Researchers supported her thinking and said that:

“....Kamala Das's poetry has established a fervent ground for poetic expression of the feminine freedoms and choices, which she considers as the urgent necessities of 'existence with due dignity and honour in the context of our times.’ [3]

In her autobiography ‘Ente Kadha’ in English it means ‘my story’, Kamala Das told –“with an eighteen year old girl, right before Das was about to be married off. I talked of having to look for love ‘outside my legal orbit’ because I was unhappy in my loveless marriage.” This feeling has been portrayed in her book *Alphabet of Lust*. The researchers and scholars have analysed her work and said that:

“Das once said, I always wanted love, and if you don’t get it within your home, you stray a little”. Though some might label Das as “a feminist” for her candour in dealing with women’s needs and desires, Das has never tried to identify herself with any particular version of feminist activism. Das’ views can be characterized as “a gut response, a reaction that, like her poetry, is unfettered by other’s notions of right and wrong” [5]

The author wants to show that there is no limit to the lust of men. The character Vijay Raje in her book enjoys sex with Suparna, by taking her to Shimla, to the same hotel, to the same room and to the same bed where he had enjoyed with her mother Manasi. An additional point that highlights the drama is that Vijay Raje happens to be the uncle of the girl he is raping. Suparna is his own niece, daughter of his own elder brother and Manasi: a culmination of their secret relationship in the past. With such clever development of the plot, Kamala Das is able to bring the irony of the circumstance to the forefront. Also, she reveals the secret to the readers with a dramatic effect in the novel. After reading her book *Alphabet of lust*, Sweta Draid explained Kamala Das as:

“Unapologetic, fearless and a mistress of words– Kamala Surayya, remains an enigma, intriguing readers with her eloquent work. [5]

With her book *Alphabet of lust*, Kamala Das draws the attention of the readers to the selfish male behaviour in high class societies. Supporting her line of thought in *Alphabet of Lust*, Kamala Bhasin, an Indian feminist and activist said that

“When I'm raped, people say that I've lost my honour. How did I lose my honour my honour is not in my vagina. It is a patriarchal idea that my rape will defile the honour of my community. I'd like to tell everyone, why did you place your Community's honour in ait is the rapist who loses his honour, we don't“[6]

Alphabet of lust is not a mere novel of story; it is a parody of social enigma. Super solicited personalities who among the huge masses resembles leaders, live two types of lives. Their appearances before society acquire high prestige, but on the other hand they are very fragile. Lust for women is a kind of natural establishment for them. It is said that attraction towards the opposite sex, would be a better euphemism. Actually author tries to imply as much as hard and harsh indications because for the plot of the story she had to go through. It is not in her novel creation but in her other creations she has used a lot of indications which ultimately earn breakthrough for her artistic dramatization. In the Indian perspective it is allowed or not, it varies from person to person but for a creator of literature the subject matter claims the first demand whether it would be allowed or not. The premature thought cannot work at the time of creation. An artist throws himself or herself for justifying the creation. At this point a devotion and honest application for the subjects of the story line can bring the high quality work outcome or satisfaction. After reading her work in *Alphabet of Lust*, Dr. Tarit Agrawal said that:

“This is all absurd and nonsense. This is not art. This is not poetry. This is not literature at all.” [7]

We can see that Kamala Das makes a complete study of each and every problem faced by women and elaborates their psyche in a great way. She leaves no impression of touch while justifying the righteousness of the path that she believes. She is never afraid of leads the path herself as a live example. She makes a wholehearted approach for establishing herself as a feminist. It can't be said ' Life is so smooth', but one thing is very clear that your writing does not have your control; it is controlled by the demand of the subject matter An author is a means and is compelled by the direction of the subject demand. In her writing Kamala Das says that:

“Women must know the needs of men, not as the social human being but as the womankind. [9]

The modern life and its changes gradually differ in the social structure and we are changing our ways with the pace of time. Kamala Das expressed herself being ahead of time and said that:

“A woman had to prove herself to be a good wife, a good mother, before she could become anything else. And that meant years and years of waiting. That meant waiting till the greying years. I didn't have the time to wait. I was impatient.” [9]

Kamala Das has put her point of view in her novel *Alphabet of lust* which has been taken with a mixed response by the Indian readers. Her way of expressing the nuances of female desires might be very blunt but it can be called as an honest attempt to write something like this on a topic which is still considered as a stigma in our society. The writer has been applauded for her guts by her readers and would always be remembered for her transparent writing style.

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