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Gender studies and feminist activism in the poetry of kamala das and Sylvia Plath

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Abstract

Gender Studies is defined as an interdisciplinary field that focuses on the complex interaction of gender with other identity markers such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, nation, and religion. It provides an insight into the history, philosophy and regulation of humans. Gender is the maleness and femaleness of a person. In gender equality, people argue for the equal rights for both genders. Gender Studies also maintains that both men and women should be treated equally regardless of gender differences. Feminism, on the other hand, puts emphasis on the equal rights and freedom for women. The concept of feminism denotes the concern with gender equality and is concerned with equality of women with men in relation to rights and freedom.

Keywords: Gender studies, ethnicity, sexuality, nation, and religion, feminism, gender equality

Introduction

The term 'gender' coined in 1955 by John Money is universally accepted as the appropriate term to describe a human characteristic. Gender is the maleness and femaleness. In gender equality, people argue for the equal rights for both genders. It also asserts that both men and women should be treated equally irrespective of their gender differences. The term 'feminism' which was coined in 1837 by Charles Fourier, a French philosopher, is concerned with the question of the equality of women with men. It lays emphasis on the equal rights and freedom for women. Gender Studies is concerned with social and cultural aspects connected with male and female sexuality and gender identity. It focuses on gender identity and sexual orientation that shape and mould behaviours and feelings. Feminism challenges the male-governed nature of society. It emphasizes the rights of women to have absolute authority over her own body and the decision to bear children or not. It explains power imbalances due to gender differences and its reflection in literature. Feminism opposes gender discriminations. It castigates the male attempt to oppress, exploit, deprive, subordinate, subjugate and marginalize women in the society. It advocates women's rights on the basis of gender equality. The principle of gender equality is based on equal social respect, rights and opportunities for everyone with the least discrimination. Feminism is concerned with gender equality and equal rights of women with men. Both Kamala Das, an Indian poetess in English and Sylvia Plath, an American feminist poetess, were concerned with women's freedom, women's equal rights with men in the world, women's dignity as humans and right assess of women in the society. Both the poetesses were opposed to traditional social values and restrictions upon women. They were hurt to find and experienced the sad status of women in the society. Thus, gender studies and feminism have led to the emergence of the literary genre popularly known as 'feminist literature'.

Feminism represents one of the most important social, economic and aesthetic revolutions of modern times. It is an interdisciplinary approach to issues of equality and equity based on gender, gender expression, gender identity, sex and sexuality as understood through social theories and political activism. Feminism asserts that basic humanness and self-hood of women are not objects but persons. It also asserts the right of woman to know the self not as a shadow of man but as an autonomous and authentic individual. It challenges the male-oriented nature of society and the long-accepted stereotypes and gender-roles thrust upon women. Gender studies focuses on the ways gender identity and sexual orientation shape behaviours and feelings.

It is a multi-disciplinary field dealing with social and cultural aspects concerned with male and female sexuality and gender identity. Kamala Das is an Indian feminist poetess writing poetry in English and Sylvia Plath is an American feminist writer producing poetry advocating gender equality and depicting the conditions of women in the unequal society. In her 'Ariel' Plath explores and depicts the gender inequality and expectations that plagued society during her times. Kamala Das who is considered as the first and most significant poetess in the feminist movement in India has portrayed a woman's mind and emotions and effectively conveyed her ideas and feelings in her poetry. She shows frankly the wrongs, injustices and humiliation that she endured in the male-dominated society in India and rebels against the conventions and restraints of society, which are meant to exploit womankind in a male-oriented world. Gender inequality in society and assertion of women's life, rights and liberty constitute the central theme of the poetic writings of the two feminist poetesses.

Aims of the Study

The study aims at discussion on the themes of Plath's poems that include the objectification and dehumanization of women, their oppression and a conflict between work and family life. Plath attempts to voice women's feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration that resulted in the emergence of the second wave of feminism. Though she never openly considered herself as a feminist in her prose and poetry she criticized women's social status in the 1950s. It also deals with Kamala Das's expression of her experiences of the feminine sensibility that were universal in more than one way. Her poem 'Introduction' is a very clear feminist statement advocating for free choice for all women (<https://www.englishliterature.info>>...). The study focuses on the issues of feminism in relation to Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath as expressed in their poetry.

Methodology of the Study

This is a qualitative descriptive study based primarily on the textual analysis of the poems of both Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath to reveal the elements of gender impact on the life of women in society and their voice against patriarchy that combine to form an authentic exegesis of feminist theory of literature. The study is a textual analysis of social and cultural aspects associated with male and female sexuality and gender identity from the poems of the two feminist poetesses, i.e., Kamala Das of the one in Indian poetry in English and Sylvia Plath of American literature.

Rationale of the Study

The research is to focus on the poems written by Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath that are expressive of gender realities, the question of gender identity, the subject of gender inequity and inequality leading to gender discriminations, sex exploitation, oppression and deprivation and injustice. The realities of women's life and women's social status in the male-governed society, women's deprivation of basic natural rights and liberty of self-decision which characterize the themes of the two poets' poetry need to be carefully and objectively exposed to let the readers know and understand the situations, feelings and emotions of women in society.

Feminism

Feminism asserts the basic humanness and self-hood of woman not as objects but as persons. It also asserts the right

of woman to know her not as a shadow of man but as an autonomous and authentic individual. Most feminists believe that western culture is pervasively patriarchal, that is, male-centred, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains. Feminists claim that literature, in all other spheres of human activity, bears the stamp of male domination. Elaine Showalter (1977) ^[7] maintains that too many abstractions which claim to be universal have in fact described only male perceptions, experiences and options. Feminists examine experiences of women from all races, classes and cultures including, for example, African, American, Latin, Asian-American, American-Indian, Lesbian and third world subjects. The goals of the feminist critics are to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices, to promote discovery and re-evaluation of literature by women, and to examine social, cultural and psycho-sexual contexts of literature and literary criticism. The struggle for woman's rights has been going on for two centuries. This struggle is marked by such books as Mary Willstone Craft's "A Vindication for the Rights of Women (1792)", John Stuart Mill's "The Subjection of Women"(1869) and the American Margaret Fuller's "Women in the Nineteenth Century (1920)". Elaine Showalter has identified three historical phases of women's literary movement. In the first phase (1840-1880), women writers were impressed by the achievements of the male writers of the period and imitated the dominant tradition and norms cultivated by those male writers. George Eliot, Elizabeth Browning, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Bronte and the other novelists of the Victorian period belong to this phase of feminism and feministic writing. The 'Feminist' phase (1880 -1920) is the second phase of women's literary movement. In this phase, women advocated minority rights and asserted the principles of autonomy of female life and expressed a strong protest against the patriarchal standards of society. Women writers like Olive Riney, Mary Coleridge, George Egerton represent this phase. In the third phase (1920 onwards), there is rediscovery of women's text and women. It is a self-discovery and self-assertion for women in the West.

Virginia Woolf was a prominent feminist writer. She wrote "A Room of One's Own" and a number of other essays on women authors and on the cultural, economic and educational disabilities within a "patriarchal" society that prevented women from realizing their creative possibilities. Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Kate Millet championed the cause of women's liberation movement and paved the way for feminist literature. Feminism has caused a major reorientation of values in literary studies and in western culture. It is vigorous and growing and has diverse schools of thoughts. It has challenged the long-cherished beliefs and practices.

Expression of Feminine Sensibility

Kamala Das is a singer of feminine sensibility and rebels against the conventions and restraints of society, which are meant to exploit womankind in a male-oriented world. K.R.S. Iyengar writes: "Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive, largely man-made world". Satya Dev Jaggi also affirms that "she is intensely concerned of herself as a woman." In her poetry Kamala Das reveals feminine sensibility. Her vision is vitally characterized by woman's point of view.

Her feminine sensibility yearns for fulfillment in love. She is deeply hurt when love is denied to her. Mere sexual union, devoid of love tires and weakens her. She frankly articulates:

... who can
Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in love?

Feminine sensibility is badly bruised and tortured by masculine callousness, heartlessness and sexuality. In her poems of love theme, we have seen how her feminine sensibility is hurt in absence of love.

Kamala Das's feminine sensibility is not to be found in her frank confession of her sexual life; it is expressly manifested in her attitude to love. She rebels against the exploitation of women in the society. She opposes all conventions, traditions accepted norms of the society. Her feminine sensibility is also fully expressed in her poem "The Music Party". In it the woman's desire to feel the warmth of love while the music lasts is followed by the agonies of dereliction when she is left alone. "Jaisurya" and "Afterwards" explore filial love and express the concept of feminism in its best form.

Feminism is a reactionary movement which calls for assigning a dignified place to a woman in the male-dominated society. It propagates the concept of equality between man and woman in the society. She challenges male-dominance and patriarchy. She is a feminist as her poetry represents female voice. She is a pro-female and is strongly opposed to the repression and exploitation in the male-dominated society. She remains a champion of woman's causes. She protests vehemently the marginalization of women in this anti-female traditional society. She demands equality of women in the society. She denounces indirectly the male-dominated society and patriarchal tradition that denies women's equality, individuality, freedom, rights and dignity as humans.

Feminism in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

Sylvia Plath is hailed an an important feminist poet in American poetry. she is concerned about the status of women in society. She explores what it means to be a woman in an unequal world. She is hurt to notice the unequal status of women in the society. She has criticized women's social status in her times. In many of her great poems Plath has taken up the problem of male tyranny over enslaved woman. Such poems are "Ariel", "Purdah", "Fever 103". In "Ariel" she explores the gender equality and expectations that plagued society at that time. The poem is mystical in the very first stanza. Plath has described her condition of degeneration in darkness. In her poem "The Jailer", Sylvia Plath discloses the intimacy of domestic rape through the lens of a horror story. Thus she exposes rape for what it is a terrifying truth. Plath writes each example of the ways in which the husband torments the wife in a declarative manner, horror the wife faces as irrefutable fact. Through her poetry, she criticizes the social norms and values that socially conditioned both men and women to behave in the appropriate way. Her "Daddy" written in 1962 is considered to be a feminist poem. In this poem Plath rebel against her father's tyranny. Her father is the oppressor. She had lived under his oppression for thirty years and she decides not to live any more under oppression. Thus Sylvia Plath is said to be a forerunner of the Feminist women. In

the last poems, the women are meek and submissive, but they are of aggressive nature that encourages them to challenge men and over-power them. In such poems there is the spirit of assertion of individual value to overcome the reflections of social institutions. In Plath's poems, men are representing as physically superior to women.

Gender Studies

Gender Studies is a branch of feminism. It explores the different meanings attached to masculinity and femininity in literature, history and culture. John Money who was the controversial and innovative sexologist, first used the term gender in 1955 in a way that we all now take it for granted to describe a human characteristic. Gender Studies is concerned with social and cultural aspects related with male and female sexuality and gender identity. Gender theory is the study of what is understood as masculine and/or, feminine and/or queer behavior in any given context, community, society or field of study. Gender Studies is important in literature because the study of gender and sexuality in literature directs criticisms of social activities, emotions, and feelings at the level of race, ethnicity, nation, culture and global issues. It helps us to understand the differences that gender makes in people's economic, social and political lives. It identifies and articulates changes that could improve people's lives based on gender differences. Feminist literary theory looks at literature assuming its production from a male-dominated perspective.

Sex, Gender and Patriarchy

Sex is a matter of biology. Sex is determined by anatomy. It is a matter of being male or female. Gender is a matter of culture. It constitutes what is feminine and masculine. The concepts of gender largely reflect the thinking and bias of patriarchy. Patriarchy is male-oriented. It builds the social order around masculine sexuality. Patriarchy defines the masculine as active, rational and brave and feminine as passive, quiet and emotional (John Peck and Martin Coyle, 1993.). The construction of gender is grounded in male attempts to control female sexuality. The twin images of woman as, on the one hand, the sexual property of men and on the other hand, the chaste mother of her children ... is the means whereby men ensure both sanctity and inheritance of their families and their extra-familial sexual pleasure. Gender determines everything including language. "Sexuality and textuality depend on difference" (Elizabeth Abel, 1981). It is the belief of some that the entire concept of female difference has caused female oppression. "Male critics who wish to pursue feminist studies do so under the umbrella term of gender studies, and in gay studies critics often approach their subject through topic of gender. Both of these groups are less interested in a writer's or reader's biological sex than in certain qualities of masculinity and femininity."

Feminism challenges the male-oriented nature of society and the long accepted stereotypes and gender-roles thrust upon women. It insists upon the right of woman to absolute authority over her own body including whether to bear children or not. It studies sex issues considered obscene for its exposure of hitherto-unrevealed facts and facets of woman's experience. Feminist critics try to explain how imbalances due to gender is getting reflected in or challenged by literary texts. Literary criticism has not only been dominated by male assumptions and ideas but also

chosen to study and praise texts that reflect male interests. It is also said that writing is writing and cannot be categorized as masculine or feminine. But feminist critics disagree and urge the readers to take note of the underlying patriarchal assumptions. "In criticism and literature, feminist critics identify sex related writing strategies including matters of subject, vocabulary, syntax, imagery, narrative structure, characterization and genre preference. For example, the novel is often described as a female genre. Feminine logic in writing is often associational, male logic is sequential, that is, goal-directed. "Male subjectivity is challenged by female subjectivity" (Helen Vendler, 1990).

Conclusion

The present study is based on an exegesis of gender issues subjecting women in patriarchal society to oppression, suppression, exploitation, deprivation and marginalization, and draws a graphic picture of the women's life and reduced dignity as human beings, which is indicative of women's complete subjugation to men as disclosed in the poetry of Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath. It deals at length with the issues of equality, and equity based on gender, gender expression, gender identity and the demand of the two poetesses for gender equality and promotion of equal rights and dignity for man and women.

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