

WOMEN'S MARGINALISATION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SELECT POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON AND KAMALA DAS

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ABSTRACT

This study intends to show how patriarchy marginalises women at different levels of their lives. It tries to explain how women endure submissive status in their own families, how matrimony appears to be a trap for them and how they face patriarchal literary prejudices as women writers. To substantiate this view, a few of poems of both Emily Dickinson and Kamala Das have been analysed in detail. An analysis of these poets' poems shows how they reject their mediocre status as women to arise as powerful female literary figures. It also tries to depict these poets as the envoys of women in liberating them from the obsolete principles of patriarchy.

KEYWORDS: *Marginalisation, Submissive Status, Matrimony and Patriarchal Literary Prejudices*

INTRODUCTION

Women's marginalisation demands a serious attention in the twenty-first century, despite several progressive changes that have occurred in our society. "Women are considered as mute beings in the domestic, social and political spheres. The universal generalization is that historically and culturally women have been identified with, and defined by terms of inferiority and subordination" (Vinyard 92). In the nineteenth-century, America witnessed drastic changes and developments in society. In spite of these social changes, it was an age marked by the inequality among men and women. The Victorian era, praised men as the superior gender. Consequently, women had to accept a secondary status. Though the early nineteenth-century women had cherished judicial, political and social rights, they remained inferior to their parents and partners. Women were forced to obey the norms designed by patriarchy. The family and social lives of the American society underwent considerable changes with the beginning of industrialisation and urbanisation. "The middle-class families began to focus more on children as individuals, and women, freed from the most time-consuming aspects of household or agriculture, labor, spent more and more of their time on child rearing and developing skills as efficient housekeepers" (Wayne 3). All these changes had a serious impact on women's life. In nineteenth-century India, women's condition remained the same as that of America. The twentieth-century witnessed the emergence of the country from the iron grips of the colonial rule. Gradually, the middle-class life of the Indians transformed. However, women's subordinate status did not undergo any change. Even now, patriarchy continues to subjugate women emotionally as well as physically and curb their freedom to think and act in their own ways.

ANALYSIS

Emily Dickinson was born in a middle-class family with a strong religious background. She grew up in a Puritan society where women were mainly raised to be obliging housewives. However, Dickinson tried to break away from these societal concords mainly by means of her poetry. She challenged the Puritan dogmas through her poems. For her, writing became one of the ways to reveal the secrets and the pangs of her mind. Her poems address the marginalised position of women and women writers in patriarchy. “Emily Dickinson’s gender informs the nature of [her] art, the nature of [her] biography, and the relation between them” (Juhasz 1). Like Dickinson, Kamala Das was a member of the traditional Nair family, Nalapat, in Malabar. When she attained her adolescence, she started to write and retaliate against the grimness of patriarchal society. In her poems, she captures the sincerity and the gentleness of womanhood. Women in her poems try to break the social rules practiced by patriarchy.

In a patriarchy, women have to suffer inferior status in their own families. Dickinson talks about her position in her own home and tries to confine herself in a small room by shaping her thoughts. “[I]n her prime, she worked as hard as anyone, went to bed latest, and got up earliest. She may actually have had the smallest room, [...]” (Sewall 330). She considers herself as “the slightest” in her house. She remained in her father’s home and “never spoke unless addressed”. She utters:

I was the slightest in the House—

I took the smallest Room—

.....

I never spoke - unless addressed—

And then, ’twas brief and low— (lines 1-2, 10-11, Poem 486)

(The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 234)

In another poem, Dickinson talks about her confinement in her own home. She wants to escape from the cocoon that completely squeezes her. She yearns to attain freedom from the clutches of her family, especially her father, Edward Dickinson, who restricted his daughter from expressing her thoughts. She compares herself to a butterfly that tries to leave the cocoon to fly across the sky. So she sings:

My Cocoon tightens – Colors tease –

I’m feeling for the Air –

A dim capacity for Wings –

Degrades the dress I wear – (lines 1-4, Poem 1099)

(The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 496)

Like Dickinson, Das also point out the marginalised position of women in their own houses. Her poems are the products of her own subordinate position in her own family. Like Dickinson, Das was also afraid of her father who controlled her. So she says: “You chose my clothes for me / My tutors, my hobbies, my friends, / And at fifteen with my

first saree you picked me a husband....” (28-30, *Only the Soul* 118). In her autobiography, she complains about her parents: “They took us [Das and her brother] for granted and considered us mere puppets, moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that were developing independently like sturdy shoots of the banyan grow out of crevices in the walls of ancient fortresses” (*My Story* 71). As Dickinson’s Puritan society demanded women’s compliance, a girl who belonged to a traditional Nair community of Das’ time, had to be docile and submissive. She was nurtured in an atmosphere where her family members instilled the lessons about maturity and womanhood into her mind. Hence, she says: “I was a child, and later they / Told me, I grew, for I became taller, my limbs / Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair” (lines 23-25, *An Introduction*).

“History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earlier days of the patriarchy they have thought best to keep a woman in a state of dependence” (Beauvoir 171). Marriage is regarded as one of the ways by which men exert control over women. Accordingly, Dickinson showed her hesitation towards the institution of marriage, childbearing and the various roles assigned to women in the nineteenth-century America. She was strong enough to reject the austerity of Puritanism and the rules set by her pious family. Her poems are noted for their social and feminist concerns. The poem “She rose to His Requirement – dropt” has a feminist stance and she reveals the fate of the nineteenth-century Puritan women. She shows us how a woman sacrifices her life in choosing matrimony. The initial lines of the poem focus on the plight of ordinary women who fit into the roles of traditional housewives. The silent fate of women can be juxtaposed with the exciting life of men. Society demands submissiveness from a woman and she has to gratify the man’s requirements. The poem depicts the gender inequality that prevailed during Dickinson’s time:

She rose to His Requirement – dropt

The Playthings of Her Life

To take the honorable Work

of Woman, and of Wife –

If ought She missed in Her new Day,

of Amplitude, or Awe –

or first Prospective – Or the Gold

In using, wear away,

It lay unmentioned – as the Sea

Develop Pearl, and Weed,

But only to Himself – be known

The Fathoms they abide –(lines1-12,Poem 732)

(*The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*359)

“ ‘She Rose to His Requirement, dropt –’ is a psychological study of the three stages in the life of a married woman; first, her consent to marriage and the result of that consent; second her disappointment both physical and metaphysical; and third, the hidden later life of the married woman’s soul” (Vendler 352). The poet says that she dropped “Playthings” of her life to take up the noble duty of “Woman, and of Wife”. The patriarchal Puritan society of New England always demanded women to be submissive. So the poet says that the unselfish deeds of a woman are like the droplets in a shell. “Dickinson indicts Victorian marriage as a trap that deprives the wife of her selfhood” (Leiter 173). Though Dickinson remained unmarried in her life, she had clearly realized the predicament of the nineteenth-century women.

Unlike Dickinson, at the age of sixteen, Das was forced to get into a married life. In the poem “Of Calcutta” she talks about how she chooses a married life to protect her family status. She was sent to an unknown city to live with her husband who treated her like a toy. She talks about her inferior status in her husband’s home:

I was sent away, to protect a family’s
 Honour, to save a few cowards, to defend some
 Abstractions, sent to another city to be
 A relative’s wife, a hausfrau for his home, and
 A mother for his sons, yet another nodding
 Doll for his parlour, a walkie talkie one to
 Warm his bed at night... (lines 76- 82)

(*Collected Poems* 58-59)

She highlights the fate of women who turn to be the playthings in men’s hands. They attain the status of mere sexual objects to satisfy men’s lust. When she points out her own predicament, she implies the dilemma of the Indian women who have to yield their personality in front of men:

[...] he folded
 Me each night in his arms and told me of greater
 Pleasures that had come this way, richer harvests of
 Lust, gleaned from other fields, not mine; the embers died
 Within me then. In silence I lay at night and
 Thought of human love.(lines 87-91)

(*Collected Poems* 59)

Indian patriarchy permits men to subjugate women in several ways. It forces women to accept their subordinate status. In this context Das points out her own situation: “Here in my husband’s home, I am a trained circus dog / Jumping my routine hoops each day, where is my soul, / My spirit, where the muted tongues of my desire?” (lines 94-96, *Collected Poems* 59).

Dickinson, like Das, voices her resentment against matrimony. She is against the traditional notion of marriage where a woman has to surrender to her husband. She mocks patriarchy where marriage proves to be a “solemn contract”. She utters:

I gave myself to Him –
And took Himself, for Pay,
The solemn contract of a Life
Was ratified, this way – (lines 1-4, Poem 580)

(The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 283)

“All history attests that man has subjugated women to his will, used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasures, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never has he desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill. He has done all he could to debase and enslave her mind [...]” (Grimke 10). In a patriarchal structure, men subjugate women to make them forget their inborn nature. Women are given a secondary status so that they surrender their individuality to men. In the poem “The Proud One”, Das talks about the innate urge of a man to overpower a girl. She is the representative of many Indian women who repress their emotions to continue their existence in patriarchy. She says:

Perhaps it had begun as a young man's most
Normal desire to subjugate a girl.
But when she, being silly, spurned him, he took
The country as his bride and rode her
For thirty years. (lines 1-5)

(The Descendants 24)

Das' another poem, “An Introduction”, tells us the outlook of a patriarchal society. They ask her to comply with the roles set by the conventional Nair society. Ignoring the advice of her family, she deliberately attempts to assert her own identity. This thought forces her to act in diverse ways. Consequently, she tries to ignore her femininity and says: “[...] I wore a shirt and my / Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored / My womanliness” (31-33, “An Introduction”, *Summer in Calcutta* 62). Das ignores the traditional patriarchal concept of femininity. They discourage her from ignoring her womanliness by choosing her attire. They even advise her to be “a quarreler with servants”. She talks about the categorisers who advise her to adapt to the traditional role of a woman:

[...] Dress in sarees, be girl,
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in, oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. [...] (lines 33-35)

(Summer in Calcutta 63)

Dickinson also stresses her decision to ignore the Puritan notions of womanhood. She rejects androcentric customs and establishes her distinctiveness as a poet. She shows her anger towards the New England society that dictates the rules. She even rejects the spiritual pretensions of the Puritan society and says:

I'm ceded – I've stopped being Theirs –
 The name They dropped upon my face
 With water, in the country church
 Is finished using, now,
 And They can put it with my Dolls,
 My childhood, and the string of spools,
 I've finished threading – too – (lines 1-7, Poem 508)

(The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 247)

Both Dickinson's and Das' poems expose how they overthrow the traditional concept of femininity. Transgressing the rules of patriarchy, they have proven their roles as poets of boundless literary talents. Though Dickinson remained a recluse, her poems clearly echo her disagreement with patriarchy that controls women. In the following poem, she reveals her decision to act against her society and says:

I took my Power in my Hand –
 And went against the World –
 'Twas not so much as David – had –
 But I – was twice as bold – (lines 1-4, Poem 540)

(The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson 263)

The same kind of resolve is visible in Das' poems. She is determined to establish her role as a poet. She neglects the androcentric literary rules that tarnish the literary perceptions of female writers and affirms her identity as a poet. She utters:

Don't write in English, they said, English is
 Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
 Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
 Every one of you? (lines 7-10)

(“An Introduction”, Summer in Calcutta 62)

Both Dickinson and Das reveal the literary prejudices of patriarchy during their times. They were aware of their poetic skills. In a letter written to Higginson in 1870, Dickinson defines poetry in this way: “If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were

taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?" (L342, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* 473-74). Dickinson, in the following poem, echoes her determination to write poems against the will of the Puritan patriarchy that hails the masculine poetic skills. Women's verses were considered unworthy of articulation. Hence, they had to embrace an inferior literary position. However, Dickinson rejects this inferior position offered by patriarchy and says:

They shut me up in Prose –
As when a little Girl
They put me in a Closet –
Because they liked me "still" – (lines 1-4, Poem 613)

(*The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* 302)

Das is also aware of her obligation as a poet. She says in her autobiography: "Poets, even the most insignificant of them, are different from other people. They cannot close their shops like shopmen and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them, they feel the pressures and the torments. A poet's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality" (*My Story* 151).

[...] Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. (lines 10-13)

("An Introduction", *Summer in Calcutta* 62)

CONCLUSIONS

Both Dickinson's and Das' poems serve as the cross-section of their respective patriarchal societies. Their poems depict women's mediocre status in their own houses and how they try to attain freedom from the clutches of patriarchy. These poets' poems also show how women abandon their dreams and expectations consequent upon choosing matrimony. Both the poets have disclosed the deception of patriarchy in designing the social and moral codes for women who have to enact the pre-determined traditional roles. In an androcentric society, women's aspirations and ambitions are always ignored. An analysis of these poets' poems shows that they initially show reluctance to adapt themselves to the patriarchal rules. Later, they vehemently discard their marginalised status in patriarchy and fight against the androcentric literary rules to create their identity as poets with several astonishing perceptions of womanhood.

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