

Interrogating the 'Body-politics' and Construction of 'Subjectivity' in Kamala Das's 'An Introduction'

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Abstract: *The conception of gender discourse is closely interlinked with the body in contemporary feminist studies. The body is considered the point of reference for gender distinction, but it also takes an active part in creating self-identity and subjectivity. The supremacy of males remains unchallenged for the socio-political privileges by its practices, norms, and traditions. This paper is concerned with female body-politics and subjectivity construction, as seen in the poem 'An Introduction' by Kamala Das. It also analyzes and evaluates the poem in terms of representing the body to understand the reality of existing discourse of gender in the patriarchal society and also the construction of subjectivity of both the sexes with special references to prominent feminists like Simon de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Stuart Hall and other contemporary renowned critics and advocates of gender studies.*

Keywords: 'Gender', 'Body', 'Subjectivity', 'Feminists'.

INTRODUCTION

Recent feminist scholarship challenges the body's discourse as a mere biological entity. It asserts that a person's identity or subjectivity is created by the performative acts of the body predetermined by socio-political norms and traditions. Stuart Hall argues that 'identity is the 'production' which is never completed always in process and always constituted within, and not outside, representation' (222). Therefore body may be understood as a subject constructed through the performance of the inherited socio-cultural practices and norms. Despite the popular and consensual perception in modern society, both men and women are equally treated; ironically, the situation is far removed from reality. Male always hold a higher and dominating position over females to embrace the glory of unchallenged supremacy in a patriarchal society. This paper aims to examine the gendered body politics and construction of subjectivity as represented in Kamala Das's 'An Introduction.'

Kamala Das, Malayalam pen name Madhavikutty, Muslim name Kamala Surayya (1934-2009) is one of the first generation renowned Indian women poetess known for her uniqueness in subject theme and style of her writings. She very candidly raises questions about female sexuality

and woman's treatment and experience in most of her writings. Srinivas Iyenger remarks that Kamala Das is "a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an intensive, largely man-made world" (680). She seems to raise her voice against the ill practices of gender discrimination in most of her poems. The biological body has been understood to form a female identity, especially in her poems. Her poems straightforwardly talk about the unappeasable longing for identity regarding her suppressed self, which seems to be artistically trapped in the web of male chauvinism. Her poem 'An Introduction' intends to re-examine the issues related to sexuality and gender politics, which are very relevant to understanding the politicization of body in terms of constructing the identity and subjectivity within the patriarchal society's inherent structure.

BODY-POLITICS IN KAMALA DAS'S 'AN INTRODUCTION'

A close reading of Kamala Das's 'An Introduction,' first appeared in *Summer in Calcutta* and then in *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, reveals the sufferings, frustration, and suppression of the poetic persona and the relationship of a woman with her own body which seems to be largely controlled by the factors such as adulthood, marriage, procreativity and other cultural factors associated with it. From the very outset of the poem, Das's primary concern is the construction of female identity and the roles assigned to it, emphasizing female sexuality. She emphasized that identity is constructed through the performativity of the stereotyped gender roles prescribed by society. Judith Butler argues that gender performativity is nothing but socio-cultural construction: "[G]ender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (519). Das, in this poem, portrays how the concept of sex/gender is predestined in the society following certain features of the body, which eventually leads to the formation of the female identity. The poetic persona minutely delineates the picture of how her grown-up body turns into an important instrument in the formation of her identity:



They told me I grew, for I become tall my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair
swelled, and one or two places sprouted hair. (Das 43)

Women are acknowledged as 'body' and have been treated accordingly. With her grown-up body, the definition of love for her gets changed:

When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank
Pitifully. (Das 43)

The society does not stop here; rather, it goes on to instruct her what she has to do because of her womanliness, which leads to her construction of identity according to social norms of gender 'performativity':

Dress in sarees, be the girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in, Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. (Das 43)

These lines highlight her concern about how society tries to mold her subjectivity, which cannot be imagined without its relations to the body. As Butler remarks, one's body "becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (523). Edgar and Sedgwick have proposed a similar kind of idea: "The body is not simply there, as a brute fact of nature, but is incorporated into nature. The body is indeed a key site at which culture and cultural identity is expressed and articulated..." (47). The staunch supporters of patriarchy even tell the protagonist to choose a 'role' as per her sex/gender and not cry "embarrassingly loud when/ Jilted in love" (Das 43). The body turns into a social subject, often represented through the cultural codes and conduct as clearly reflected in her poem 'An Introduction.'

CONSTRUCTION OF 'SUBJECTIVITY'

Scholars have defined female subjectivity as self-consciousness to construct an identity of her own while fighting against the patriarchal society's normative social prejudices. Donald E. Hall argues that it is an awareness of the 'self' within "the tension between choice and illusion, between imposed definitions and individual interrogations of them, between old formulae and new responsibilities" (2). Das's poetry portrays the poetic persona as a mere object or victim before the patriarchy. It draws the line for the construction of female subjectivity through the life of her female protagonist. The protagonist seems to raise her voice by resisting the social norms for a particular gender, be it male or female. She starts to "wear a shirt... Brother's trousers" and also cuts her hair short to neglect her 'womanliness' (Das 43). Destroying the social identity, she seems to endeavor to construct an identity for her own.

Chris Weeden articulates female subjectivity as

"the product of the society and culture in which we live in...[that] changes with shifts in wide discursive fields which constitute them" (33). This change could be achieved only through appropriate self-initiative and convictions. In the later part of the poem, the poetic persona rejected her 'womanliness' and stepped forward to find her true feminine sensibility. Now she defines love as follows:

In him ...the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me...the ocean's tireless
Waiting. (Das 44)

The above metaphor suggests that a man can only attain fulfillment and completeness through a woman. The existence of a river only gets its meaning after flowing into the ocean. After her realization, she behaves accordingly as the male counterpart does. In this way, the female poetic persona can create her own 'self' by deconstructing her previous self. Instead of flying from that state, she consciously creates her subjectivity, which can be explicitly seen in the concluding lines of the poem:

I am a sinner,
I am a saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours. no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I. (Das 44)

CONCLUSION

After analyzing the life of the poetic persona in the poem 'An Introduction,' both from her subjective and social stance, there seem to be ample references not to consider here as a mere victim of the societal norms, and rather she very strongly goes against the wave to reconstruct her feminine subjectivity. M.K. Naik rightly says that "Das' poetry produces one of a bold, ruthless honesty, tearing passionately at conventional attitudes to reveal the quintessential woman within" (24). She even frankly speaks of her body politicization of the society and how she comes over it. In the process of construction of subjectivity, as per Weedon, the woman also "exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices" (125). The same is applied in Das's 'An Introduction,' were among the society's hostile situations, the poetic persona resisted and revolved around her own subjective beliefs.

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