CHAPTER II

FEMININE CONSCIOUSNESS

Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti and Kamala Das share a number of concerns in their poetry. Their experiences at the core are almost identical despite the fact that they belong to different times and cultures. However, this is not something specific to these three poets only; significantly women poets in general share such experiences. Women's writings confirm that they have found themselves in almost identical conditions throughout time and across cultures.

Traditionally women's life has been linked with the institution of family, which is largely based on a clear demarcation between male and female roles. Generally the role of women was considered inferior to that of men. Literary history of America, England and India testifies that women were assigned qualities which were considered inferior; female experience in itself was considered trivial and unworthy of literary expression. Thomas Powell wrote in *Art of Striving*:

Let them learne plaine workes of all kind,  
so they take heed of too open seeming.
Instead of song and musick let them
learne cookery and laundry, and instead
of reading Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia,
let them read the grounds of housewifery,
I like not a female, poetesse at any hand. 1

These lines make it abundantly clear that women were
considered intellectually inferior to men, fit only to
look after "home and hearth." That should explain also
why "no women poet has ever had sufficient influence so
that her world alone could make or break a reputation."2

The writings of women have always been evaluated by
patriarchal critical standards which do not provide for
grasping the subtleties of female experience. In a world
where everything is expressed and evaluated in terms of
male norms and values, women in all cultures found themselves
usually in deep conflict with the society around dominated
by men. Even in the present century, in spite of the many
far-reaching changes that have taken place in the condition
of women, women poets still find themselves in a situation
of conflict and strain. Poems develop out of the most
complex matrix of feelings and circumstances. The

1 Thomas Powell, "Art of Striving," Quoted in Cheryl Walker,
The Nightingale's Burden: Women Poets and American Culture
Before 1900 (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982), p. 3.

2 Cheryl Walker, pp. 2-3.
subconscious is far more vulnerable than the conscious mind. Hence much of women's poetry is an expression of their longings and fears, their anger, and the compromises they are forced to make with patriarchal culture. In the writings of women poets we accordingly come across recurrent "images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort."  

In the seventeenth century America Anne Bradstreet expressed her resentment against a culture that thought of women as inferior beings, incapable of writing poetry. In "The Prologue" she writes:

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says, my hand a needle better fits,
A Poet's pen, all scorne, I should thus wrong;
For such despight they cast on female wits;
If what I doe prove well, it won't advance
They'll say its stolen, or else, it was by chance.  

In a similar vein, Aphra Behn, a seventeenth century

3 Cheryl Walker, p. 2.
English poet, wrote about the intellectual oppression of women of her times in her poem "From the Epilogue to Sir Patient Fancy."

What has poor Woman done, that she must be Debar'd from Sense, and Sacred Poetry?
Why in this Age has Heaven allow'd you more, And Woman less of Wit than heretofore?
We once were fam'd in story, and could write Equal to men; Cou'd govern, nay cou'd fight. We still have passive Valour, and can show, Wou'd Custom give us leave, the active too, Since we no Provocation want from you. 6

A similar protest is expressed in Anne Finch's poem "The Introduction":

They tell us, we mistake our sex and way; Good breeding, passion, dancing, dressing, play Are the accomplishments we shou'd desire; To write, or read, or think or to enquire Wou'd cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time, And interrupt the Conquests of our prime; 7

An Indian poet Mira Bai gives a glimpse of the plight of women in the society of her day even in her devotional lyrics, in one of which she calls herself a woman powerless.


7 Joanna Bankier and Deidre Lashgare, p. 181.
Family Pride, fear of the World's opinion
I threw away as water
You should hide yourself, O King
I am a woman, powerless........ 8

Mary Lee, Lady Chudleigh writes about the struggles of the women of her day, whom wedding knots had deprived of freedom and turned into slaves:

Wife and servant are the same,
But only differ in the name,
For when that fatal knot is tied,

................................................
Fierce as an eastern prince he grows,
Then but to look, to laugh, or speak
Will the nuptial contract break
Like mutes, she signs alone must take
And never any freedom take, .... 9

The poet exhorts women to shun their "wretched state" and hate men:

Then Shun, Oh! Shun that wretched state,
And all the fawning flatterers hate;
Value yourself, and men despise,
You must be proud, if you'll be wise. 10

Frances Osgood's "Woman" mentions details about the roles females were forced to accept by the society of their day.

Taught to restrain, in cold Decorum's School
The Step, the smile, to glance and dance by rule;


9  Joanna Bankier and Deidre Lasghare, p. 180.

10 Joanna Bankier and Deidre Lasghare, p. 181.
To smooth alike her words and waving stress,
And her pure heart's impetuous play repress,
Each airy impulse—every frolic thought
Forbidden, if by Fashion's law untaught. 11

Towards the end of the poem she expresses her desire for freedom. It is, in fact, this aspiration for freedom that prompted Elizabeth Barrett Browning to urge women poets to transform their sufferings and anger into art and to question the passive model of femininity approved by the mid-Victorian society. In "Curse for a Nation," she redefines the subject matter of poetry for women, who only wrote "how the heart melts and the tears run down," and thought poetry as the domain of men. She wants women to voice their resentment in art, "Weep and write/a curse from the depths of womanhood." Her poem "Aurora Leigh" is full of feminist insights and reveals her sensitivity to the "polarized and limited definition of woman."

By the way
The works of women are symbolical
We sew sew prick our fingers, dull our sight
Producing what, "a pair of Slippers." Sir
To put on when you're weary—or a stool
To stumble or and vex you ..... 12

Even in the present century, when women have gained freedom

11 Quoted in Cheryl Walker, p. 30.

12 Joanna Bankier and Deidre Lasghare, p. 197.
in several ways, almost identical concerns regarding women's roles are voiced in women's poetry. For instance Sylvia Plath's, "The Applicant" typifies the mechanized roles of a woman which virtually destroy her personality:

Here is a hand
To fill it and willing
To bring tea-cups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk and talk ... .

Anne Sexton too writes about what she regards the mechanical role of women in "Consorting with Angels"

I was tried of being a woman
tired of the spoons and the pots
tired of my mouth and my breasts
tired of the cosmetics and the silks.

Dennis Levertov is vehement in her blunt rejection of the male principle of possession:

Don't lock me in Wedlock
I want marriage, an encounter.

It is thus clear that women have struggled against male domination. Their responses to the male-oriented universe,


as their writings bear out, have ranged between passivity and rebellion. While giving expression to their tortured sensitiveness, they have also voiced their passion for freedom. Thus themes of aspiration and frustrated longings dominate women's writings. Some women poets, especially of the nineteenth century England, did not feel it safe to express their true feelings; so they chose to write under male pseudonyms, or signed their work with initials like 'A.W.O.E' - A Woman of England. Some women poets avoided writing on social issues and devoted their writings mainly to the exploration of their inner life. Some disguised their subjectivity by wearing "The mask of the proper women" - spiritual, passive, ethereal and wrote on sublime subjects such as religion and renunciation. They preferred to follow the "ideology of a true woman" raised by the "cult of true womanhood." According to Bernikow, religion proved an interesting and acceptable subject for woman because "it focussed on men who were God and Father and the son and suited patriarchal taste more subtly."


17 The ideal female stereotype had the cardinal value of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.

Rossetti, Emily Bronte, Emily Dickinson, George Eliot, Charlette Mew and many others wrote frequently on religion. In fact, renunciation became another interesting alternative subject for them; for it gave them the power to escape from their world.

It is to the feminine poetic tradition across cultures discussed in the preceding pages that Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti and Kamala Das belong. They share the concerns that have haunted the feminine consciousness, among themselves and also with a large community of women poets. All the three of them (as we shall see in the course of this study) were motivated by the same kind of pressures, and many of their poems taken together embody similar tensions. In the discussion that follows we shall see what links them and how they fit into the tradition of women's poetry.

Emily Dickinson wrote at a time when conditions in America were unfavourable for women to pursue a poetic career. Poetry as a serious art form was not an acceptable genre for women writers, because writing poetry was considered "as an almost sacred vocation performed only by

women were considered quiet, sober, meek and pious, fit to attend only religious services. This, however, did not stop women from writing poems and publishing them in ladies' magazines. Dickinson was fairly well read in the poetry of women: "She pored over the Brontes, Elizabeth Barret Browning, George Eliot, sending their poems as treasured presents to her favourites. She knew American women poets like Maria Brooks and Lydia Welby. In fact, she admired Elizabeth Barret Browning; she read her poems with special fervour and kept her picture in her room. Numerous references to her work in her letters testify that she especially admired her *Aurora Leigh*.

Disgusted with the society that stifled women's imagination, and influenced by poets like Elizabeth Barret Browning, Dickinson often expressed her resentment against the received image of woman of her times in her poems. Take for instance the poem "They Shut me in Prose."

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They shut me up in Prose -
As when a little Girl
They put me in a Closet
Because they liked me "still" -

Still! Could themselves have peeped -
And seen my Brain - go round -
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason - in the Pound -

Himself has but to will,
And easy as a Star
Abolish his Captivity -
And laugh - No more have I - 22

Here Dickinson is expressing her need for freedom in "finding her own voice," which has been the dominant central concern of feminine poetry. The word 'They' in the poem is a clear reference to the society that did not want women as poets. Dickinson describes the bindings imposed on her in terms of imprisonment and confinement. Rendered quite forcefully through similes of a girl being shut up in a closet to be still and a bird put in prison for violation, she points at her society that expected a woman to be quiet and sober. The girls in such a society were brought up under strict discipline so that they did not strive to go against social norms. Poetry offered them freedom of thought. This was considered dangerous to the social order, and the idea is reinforced in the

poem through the simile of the bird detained in prison for violating its duty against the sovereign. Dickinson mocks at the existing convention by saying that like a bird every true singer can escape his/her captivity and sing. The poem is reminiscent of the first part of *Aurora Leigh*, where Barret Browning refers to the society's attempt to destroy the female imagination.

Am I such indeed? The name is royal, and sign it like a queen
Is what I dare not, - though some royal blood Would seem to tingle in me now and then with sense of power and ache 23

Several of Dickinson's letters reveal that she was sensitive to the psychic pressures on the women of her day. For instance, in one of her letters to Susan Gilbert she expresses her distrust of marriage, which was considered the most desirable destiny for women.

These unions, my dear Susie, by which two lives are one, this sweet and strange adoption wherein we can but look, and are not yet admitted, how it can feel the heart, and make it gang wildly beating, how it will take us one day and make us all its own and we shall not run away of it, but lie still and be happy. 24


Although the letter reflects the conventional modesty expected of a young woman of her society, the underlying tone of doubt in phrases "Strange adoption" and "how it will take us one day" reflects Dickinson's distrust of marriage. The other phrases "Where in we can but look," "We shall not run away" suggest that matrimony was looked upon as an inescapable destiny for females by the Dickinsonian society.

Dickinson protested against the institution of marriage by choosing to live a cloistered life in her father's house. In her view a sexually realized woman was as "helplessly rooted in her gender as a flower is trapped in earth." In one of her letters to Susan Gilbert, after she had decided not to marry, she wrote:

How dull our lives must seem to the brides and the plighted maiden, whose days are fed with gold, who gathers pearls every evening; but to the wife, Susie sometimes the wife forgotten, our lives perhaps seem dearer than all others in the world; you have seen flowers at morning, satisfied with the dew, and those same sweet flowers at noon with their heads bowed in anguish before the mighty Sun; think you these thirsty blossoms will now need naught but-dew? No, they will cry for sunlight, and pine for the burning noon, tho' it scorches them, scathes them; they have got through with peace - they know that the man of noon, is mightier than the morning and their life is hence forth to him. Oh, Susie, it is dangerous and it is all too dear, these simple trusting spirits, and the spirits mightier which we cannot resist! It does so rend me Susie.
the thought of it when it comes that
I tremble least at sometimes I too am
yielded up. 25

The letter reveals Dickinson's strong feminist attitude
towards marriage, which is described ironically as "Sweet,"
since society supposes it to be so. The role of a woman
and the duties of a wife are obliquely compared to the
flowers that are freshened in the morning by the dew but
later scorched by the Sun at noon. For a wife, marriage is
far from being desirable, since she knows, "her life is
henceforth for him" and not for herself. Dickinson in the
end expresses her fear that she may yield to social pressures,
because in her society marriage was the only possible
respectable way a woman could live. Based on the Puritan
assumption that men were superior to women and therefore
wives were subject to the will of their husbands, successful
marriage required woman to be passive towards the "mighty"
male. Dickinson's disapproval of this kind of marriage is
expressed in many of her poems. In "The Sun-Just touched
the Morning" she contrasts the powerfulness of men and the
powerlessness of women in terms of the images of the male
Sun and the female Morning.

25

Johnson and Ward, L. 93.
The female "Morning" feels happy that her union with the male "Sun" will elevate her into a "Raised-Ethereal thing." Like every married woman, she anticipates that her life would be full of gaiety and charm in the company of the male Sun. But the male Sun glides away from her, leaving her alone, making her pine for love, which is precious as "Diadems" for a married woman. Her helplessness and struggle are suggested through the words "fluttered" and "Staggered." A fully realized woman in the Dickinsonian society was honoured and a woman without the experience of wedded love was seen as devoid of status:

Her unanointed forehead -
Hence forth - Her only One

This poem, on the whole, can be read as Dickinson's sad commentary on the plight of a woman in the role of a wife.

In yet another poem "She Rose to His Requirements"
she argues how marriage immobilizes women by annuling their imagination:

She Rose to His Requirement—dropt
The Playthings of Her Life
To take the honorable Work
Of Women, 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
Develops Pearl, and Weed,
But only to Himself—be known
The Fathoms they abide—

( J. 359 )

According to Suzzane Juhanz "Amplitude," "Awe," "First Prospective" are a part of Dickinson's unique vocabulary which can be translated into more familiar metaphors such as depth, breadth vision meaning,"26 all attributes of mind. Trapped by the needs and expectations of their husbands the potentialities of a married woman remain "unmentioned." Like pearls and weeds in the sea it remains submerged and all its preciousness is wasted, thus her personality suffers diminution. The lines are reminiscent of Aphra Behn already quoted and also of

Emily Bronte in *Wuthering Heights*, a novel Dickinson especially admired.

Dickinson's concern for the women of her times, as expressed in her letters and poems, is reminiscent of Sarah Grimke, a feminist of 1837, who challenged the idea of the natural superiority of man and the social institutions predicted on it. Whether Dickinson was aware of her writings is not known, but one notices a remarkable similarity between the two in their views on marriage (in its bearing on woman). For instance, in one of her letters Grimke wrote:

... Woman, instead of being elevated by her union with man, which might be expected from an alliance with a superior being, is in reality lowered. She generally loses her individuality, her independent character, her moral being. She becomes absorbed into him and hence forth is looked at, and acts through the medium of her husband. 28

27 See Catharine Linton's Speech to Nelly Dean in Chapter 12 of *Wuthering Heights*: "I wish I were a girl again, half savage, and hardy, and free; and laughing at injuries, not maddening under them! Why am I so changed? Why does my blood rush into a hell of tumult at a few words?"

It is because of her sensitivity to the issue of male dominance that in many of her poems Dickinson pictures male-female relationship as that of "masterful husband and a self-abnegating wife." In love poems too, the love experienced by the two lovers is not a participatory experience of mutual love, but an event of radical inequality, based as it is on a woman's inferiority. For instance, in the following poem:

A Bee has burnished Carriage  
Drove boldly to a Rose  
Combiningly alighting -  
Himself - his carriage was -

The Rose - received his visit  
With frank tranquility  
With holding not a crescent  
To his cupidity -

Their moment consummated  
Remained for him - to flee -  
Remained for - of rapture  
But the humility

( J. 579 )

The poem is about a "male" bee that comes to the "female" rose and is received by her with modesty. The female rose surrenders herself to the will of the male bee's "cupidity." When the ecstatic moments of love are consummated the bee goes off leaving behind the rose with "humility." Here in fact Dickinson seems to ask: What do women get after subjugating themselves to men? And to this her answer was that such women are reduced to a picture of utter humility.

Dickinson found that her society always reminded
her that "woman was no body." She had no self or identity in a male-dominated society. This she mourned in her poems sometimes directly and often indirectly.

Like Dickinson, Christina Rossetti too was sensitive to the issue of male dominance. Her pre-occupation with sublime subjects and indifference to contemporary and social issues made Arthur Waugh to write that "Rossetti was a woman first of all and she was content to remain a woman to the end. Her poetry does not strive or cry, it makes no effort to do anything foreign to its own gentle nature." 29 She was thought to be unlike Elizabeth Barret Browning who expressed her rebellion directly against the male-oriented norms. That explains why a "conscious preoccupation with the constricting demands of femininity do not often surface" 30 in her poetry. Like many nineteenth century women poets, she tried to repress and disguise her subjectivity by wearing the mask of a "true woman," who made religion her recurrent pre-occupation.


Christina Rossetti wrote at a time and in a society that was no better than the Puritan New England of Dickinson which deemed "feminine repression to be a scriptural command." In fact, it was a wretched time for women because the society not only put restraints on them, but also expected them to cultivate certain refinements to please men. Rossetti was acutely conscious of the limitations imposed on woman in her society. Writing in a social milieu in which aggressive speech was forbidden to women, she expressed her resentment with a "certain degree of disguise and subterfuge." The poem "Shut out" for example is about the struggle of a woman on whom society has imposed restrictions. These are described in figurative terms of imprisonment and confinement:

The door was shut, I looked between
Its iron bars; and saw it lie, 32


33 Christina Rossetti, "Shut out" William M. Rossetti, Poems of Christina Rossetti, p. 215. Subsequent quotations are from the same book, the page numbers are given at the end of every quote.
The images of closed door and iron bars remind us of Dickinson's "closet" and "Prison" as used in the poem "They shut me in Prose," discussed earlier. According to Walker, the images of chains, fetters, cage and prisons, all suggestive of confinement, are a dominant feature in women's poems. Rossetti too sees the central experience of a woman's life as one which is full of limitations and constraints. The earlier childhood visualized by her as full of joy and freedom, reminiscent of the paradisal state having its earthly analogue in a garden:

My garden, mine, beneath the sky,
Pied with all flowers bedewed and green.
From bough to bough the song-birds crossed,
From flower to flower the moths and bees:
With all its nests and stately trees
It had been mine, and it was lost.  (R. 215)

The image of the song-birds here suggests the freedom and joy of early childhood which are denied to young women by the society as they grow older. The society is a "shadowless spirit" that guards the gate of women's place of confinement.

A shadowless spirit kept the gate,
Blank and unchanging like the grave.
I, peering through, said; "Let me have,
Some buds to cheer my outcast state.  (R. 215)

Through the phrase "shadowless spirit" the poet seems to suggest

34
Cheryl Walker, p. 43.
that the society is not a concrete single man against whom rebellion is possible, but a lifeless set of harsh conventions and laws. Here one is particularly reminded of Dickinson's poem "I had not minded-walls," in which she describes the society she lived in as a tangled set of implicit laws not a single rock which one can tunnel through, but

A Cobweb - wove in Adamant - 
A Battlement - of Straw - 
A limit like the Veil 
Unto the Lady's face - 
But every Mesh - a Citadel - 
And Dragons - in the Crease -

(J. 189-190)

Likewise, for Rossetti, society is "Blank." It is emotionless, cruel, cold and unchanging like a grave. The Woman who struggles to be free is put under greater restrictions and bindings.

The spirit was silent; but he took 
Mortar and stone to build a wall; 
He left me no loophole great or small 
Through which my straining eyes might look.

(R. 215)

The image of a concrete wall reinforces the idea of confinement and of the restrictions imposed on women. The helpless woman is pictured as sitting all alone in her confined state, blinded with tears, grieving over the loss of her freedom, inflicted on her by her society:

So now I sit here quite alone, 
Blinded with tears, nor grieve for that, 
For nought is left worth looking at 
Since my delightful land is gone.
The helpless victim gets finally reconciled to her state, feeling content with what Nature immediately offers (though it doesn't match her aspiration):

A violet bed is budding near,
Wherein a lark has made her nest;
And good they are, but not the best;
And dear they are, but not so dear.  (R. 216)

The longing for freedom and the underlying resentment expressed in the earlier stanzas end on a note of resignation in the last stanza. In fact, here Rossetti does not express her resentment directly; perhaps she feared the consequences of an open rebellion against Victorian censor that wanted women to be unassertive. Her poem "If I had words" tells us how she feels about the denial of freedom of expression to women:

If I had words, if I had words
At least to vent my misery:-
But muter than the speechless herds
I have no voice wherewith to cry,  (R. 224)

Women are likened to a "speechless herd." Such a comparison points to the condition of woman in the Victorian society which thought "a woman's highest duty was to suffer and be still."35 The helplessness of a

woman is very poignantly suggested in the following lines:

I have no strength to lift my hands,
I have no heart to lift mine eye.  
(R. 224)

Rossetti depicts the plight of a woman in terms of the soul's imprisonment.

My soul is bound with brazen bands, 

My thoughts that wander here and there,
That wander wander listlessly,
Bring nothing back to cheer my care,
Nothing that I may live thereby.

These are depressing lines indeed. The protagonist wishes for death to escape the hostile world:

My soul is crushed and like to die.  
(R. 224)

According to Walker, most of the women poets thought that compensation for what the world denied them lay in fulfilment in the life hereafter. This aspiration for escape and freedom is expressed in Rossetti's poem through the images of flight. The person wishes to have the wings of a dove to fly over to the desired land of love and freedom.

If I had wings as hath a dove,
If I had wings that I might fly,
I yet would seek the land of love
Where fountains run and run not dry:

Cheryl Walker, p. 37.
She thinks that by doing so she would succeed in getting over her limitations: make straight for the land of fulfilment" without getting bogged down in questions like "where" and "how."

If I had wings as hath a dove,
I would not sift the what and why,
I would make haste to find out Love,
If not to find at least to try.
I would make haste to Love, my rest —— (R. 225)

Like Emily Dickinson and several other women poets, Rossetti thought that a women's life was one of the helplessness. To overcome it, she aspires for freedom which is a strong motif in many of her poems. "A Wish," for instance, gives full expression to this aspiration through various analogies.

I wish I were a bird
That out of sight oth soar;
I wish I were a song once heard
But often pondered o'er,
Or shadow of a lily stirred
By wind upon the floor,
Or echo of a loving word
Worth all that went before,
Or memory of a hope deferred
That springs again no more.

(R. 272)

In fact, in poem after poem, Rossetti has expressed a ceaseless longing for escape and liberation from man-made rules and regulations. But the longing remains only a longing. That is why sadness and gloom characterize the
mood of most of her poems. In "Wind Flower" the protagonist desires to escape this world, but feels helpless when she realises that she can't do so:

'Alas! your crown of wind - flowers
Can never make you fly:
I twist them in a crown to-day,
And to-night they die.'

(R. 290)

The desire to run away into a world beyond the limits of mortal life is once again a pervasive feeling in the poem:

Put on your crown of wind-flowers
But whither would you go?
Beyond the singing of the sea
And the storms that blow.

Rossetti's poems collectively bear out her belief that a woman cannot change her destiny however strongly she desires to do so. Her poem "A Soul" shows woman caught in a web of unpleasant circumstances, struggling to escape. Her helplessness is accurately presented in these suggestive lines.

In-domitable in her feebleness
Her face and will athirst against the light.

(R. 272)

These examples show that while Rossetti was sensitive to feminine feeling, she accepted the 'burden' of womanhood, thinking that passivity and feebleness are the essential qualities of an ideal woman. Perhaps, this was the only way in which she could pass the Victorian censor that
equated "appropriate female singing with the sound of Angel whispering."

Having submitted herself completely to the times, she avoided any direct hostility towards her society. It is for this reason that she perhaps chose to be almost silent on male-female relationship. Her sensitivity to the issue of woman's position is evident in her letter to Augusta Webster, a well-known poetess in her day.

••• if female rights are sure to be overborne for lack of female voting influence, then I confess I feel disposed to shoot ahead of my instructresses, and to assert that female Members of Parliament are only right and reasonable. Also I take exceptions at the exclusion of married women from the suffrage, - for who so apt as mothers - all previous arguments allowed for the moment - to protect the interests of themselves and their offspring?" 38

The letter expresses Rossetti's concern for female rights, her sensitivity to the feminine feeling of inequality that has haunted the feminine consciousness through centuries.


38 Georginia Battiscombe, p. 171.
Kamala Das too is sensitive to feminine feeling but unlike Rossetti, gives direct expression to this in an uninhibited manner. To quote Iyenger, "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."39 Dwivedi expresses a similar view, "Her poems project a peculiarly feminine sensibility which is at once sad and honest."40 Quite a large number of her poems express her resentment against the stereotype of woman in society; in this respect her position is no way different from that of Dickinson and Rossetti. Living in a society that considers an ideal female as one who is sober and meek, and whose world is bound within a family life, she is a devoted wife and a mother. However, like Rossetti and Dickinson, she also sees female life as one which is full of limitations and restrictions. For instance, in her poem "Introduction" she writes how society wants to see her only in a traditional, socially-acceptable role.

... I wore a shirt and my Brother's trousers, cut my hair and ignored


My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroider, be Cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls, or peep in through our lace-draped windows.

Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role ....  41

These lines bring to mind Anne Finich, Countess of Winchilsea's poem "The Introduction" quoted earlier, in which she complains against society's attempt at binding woman within the traditional feminine roles.

The social environment that imposed traditional roles on woman made Kamala Das intensely conscious of herself as a woman and sharpened her disgust towards male-oriented universe. In many of her poems she protests against marriage as an institution in male domination. To her a sexually-realized woman is just like a woman living all alone, since marriage in her view does not provide the woman the kind of emotional bond and security she longs for. For instance, in her poem "The Old Play House" she comments upon the outcome of marriage:

You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget

41
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless Pathways of the Sky. It was not to gather knowledge Of yet another man that I came to you to learn What I was, and by learning, to learn to grow, but every Lesson you gave was about yourself. 42

This is a sad comment on the institution of marriage and a plaint on behalf of woman that she is denied love and identity as is unambiguously emphasized here:

Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and Became a dwarf. 43

Instead of providing her companionship, and helping her to have emotional fulfilment, her husband considers her only as a toy to play with:

You were pleased
With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices
You called me wife, 44

She is meant only to satiate his lust:

I was taught to break saccharine in your tea and To offer at the right moment the vitamins. 45

42 Kamala Das, "The Old Playhouse," The Old Play house and Other Poems, p. 1.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid
45 Ibid.
Finding herself trapped in the mechanized role of a wife, she loses her 'natural mirth' and enthusiasm for life and becomes just like 'Old Play house' that was once pleasant but is now dismal with all "its lights put out." Kamala Das is revulsed by this suppression of woman's identity. The poem is strongly reminiscent of Sylvia Plath's "The Applicant." Plath like Das caricatures the role of a wife because it is a denial of woman's personality. Like Das's persona Plath's lady in "Applicant" can serve man in a number of ways. Tea cups stand in both the poems as symbols of corrosion; serving tea cups to husbands reduces the personalities of wives. Both Plath and Das feel that restricting woman's movement to her household affairs diminishes her personality. Dickinson's poem "She Rose to His Requirement" laments the same plight.

Another poem in which Kamala Das expresses utter disgust at male domination is "The Stone Age" in which the husband turns into a despicable "Old Fat Spider," reducing his wife to a showpiece in his drawing room, a wall flower of no consequence. The passivity and powerlessness of the wife are depicted through the images of 'bird of stone' and 'a granite dove.'

Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind, Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment,
Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone,
A granite Dove, you build round me a shabby
drawing room... 46

The contempt for the husband is sharpened when we read
that he disturbs his wife's morning sleep:

And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly while
You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-
morning sleep,
You stick a finger into my dreaming eye. 47

Seeing that her husband considers it is his birthright
to dominate his wife, she rebels and seeks love outside
marriage.

When you leave, I drive my blue battered car
Along the bluer sea. I run up the forty
Noisy steps to knock at another's door.
Through peep-holes, the neighbours watch,
they watch me come ........ 48

In "I shall Some Day" Kamala Das looks forward to her
liberation from the bonds of marriage because she is
sick of playing the routine roles:

I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea,
Love-words flung from doorways and of course
Your tired lust. I shall some day take. 49

The thought that in a male-oriented world she will meet
with scornful treatment everywhere makes her mourn the

47  The Old Play house and Other Poems, p. 51.
48  Ibid.
helplessness of her situation.

But, I shall some day return, losing
Nearly all, hurt by wind, Sun and rain,
Too hurt by fierce happiness to want
A further jaunt or a further spell of freedom...
then shut my eyes and take refuge, if nowhere else,

Here in your nest of familiar scorn... 50

The foregoing discussion has shown that Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti and Kamala Das think that woman's life in patriarchal culture is one of limited opportunities. Images of confinement and imprisonment are pervasive in their poems. They inwardly struggle against their society and persistently aspire for freedom and escape. What is significant is that although they belong to three different cultures, their experience of the world is quite similar. Kamala Das, whom one might have expected to have a different life in the present century, gives expression to disgust against - male oriented universe, which is evident in the poetry of both Dickinson and Rossetti. All are in deep conflict with their environment, and they alike use poetry as the medium through which they express their resentment against society in various ways and degrees.

The central tenet of this resentment is the denial

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The Old Play house and Other Poems, p. 51.
of self in each of the three writers. The environment does not let them realise their identities as women. Their love poetry serves them as a vehicle for releasing the conflicts and contraities of their complex psyche. They get over their traumas by writing about it. The two chapters that follow specifically attempt analyses of their poems on profane and sacred love with a view to defining and comparing their attitudes to love.