



“The Rule of Father”: A Study of Father-Daughter Relationship in Select Poems of Indian Poetry in English

Dr. Santanu Saha

Received: 18 Jul 2022; Received in revised form: 10 Aug 2022; Accepted: 15 Aug 2022; Available online: 21 Aug 2022

©2022 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *Indian Poetry in English by women writers has been giving birth to several issues related to feminism. These poets are trying to express their long-suppressed voice through these issues. However, in most cases they are posting their fight against patriarchy. Patriarchy, as a male dominated social system, always seems hostile to the liberation of women by suppressing their identity. Modern women poets are successful in disturbing this traditional mindset. My paper will try to focus on another perspective of this issue where ‘father’ is supposed to be the agent of patriarchal domination. I’ve tried to analyze some poems by Indian women poets in English who have incorporated ‘father’ as a character in their poems in order to expose male domination. And it is not surprising to notice that several women poets are linked by the same issue as they are a part of same social system.*

Keywords— *poems, Indian poetry, women writers.*

Indian Poetry in English by women writers acquires a significant role in the area of Indian Writing in English in particular and World Literature in general. Especially modern women poets writing in the lineage of Kamala Das (1934-2009) are distinctively different from earlier poets like Toru Dutt (1856-77) and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949). Women writing about their own lives are supposed to be a unique one and it becomes more interesting when they start expressing their personal lives in an uninhibited way. Though Kamala Das seems to be pioneer confessional poet like her American counter-parts i.e. Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, her fellow Indian women poets in English are also confessional in their own way. And that particular aspect changed the contemporary scenario of Indian English Literature. In the case of women poets, so many social issues are incorporated into their writings. They start to deal with feminist perspectives. Especially it is Kamala Das whose works provide a voice to those women who are kept submissive and subdued in our traditional male dominated system. The meek and suppressed condition of women is exploited. The issues which are long considered to be a matter of taboo are given importance in their writings. So the issues like abused childhood, early marriage, childbearing, mental

disorder, traumatic situations, schizophrenia etc appear in their works. The mere romantic or Nationalistic theme in the poetry of Toru Dutt or Sarojini Naidu becomes less important in the hands of these poets. They start believing in the ‘personal’ issues. Iyenger, while introducing Kamala Das in the chapter entitled “The New Poets” in his pioneering *Indian Writing in English* points out the difference, “ There is no doubt Kamala Das is a new phenomenon in Indo-Anglican poetry – a far cry indeed from Toru Dutt or even Sarojini Naidu” (680). So the departure from the traditional way of writing is easily discernible and the contemporaries of Das and her successors as well start mentioning such issues which are not generally reflected in the writing of male poets.

No writer can prosper in his or her works without paying proper attention to his/her tradition. So these poets do the same but simultaneously they turned the tradition upside down to show what lies beneath the so called conventional social system. It is the hierarchy, which treats male over female, gets into danger in their hands. Sanjukta Das in her *From Derozio to Dattani*, while analyzing the characteristics of Modern Indian English poetry, points out that there is a significant subject matter that is prevalent in this segment of Indian English Poetry. The poets are

concerned with the problem of 'identity'. This issue of identity, Das describes, is concerned with the concept of 'self' as in European modernist literature. She analyses it in respect of European modernism, "... where the individual feels alienated from the community yet perceives through a heightened and intensive consciousness the world around him" (21). This sense of alienation is present in modern Indian-English poets. However, in respect to the women poets belonging to this section, the 'identity of self' brings out essential truth related to the subordination of women in our society. While men remain busy in search of their identity in a disorganized modern civilization, women's 'self' lie much beneath this social structure; their 'self' is suppressed even under male ego. Sanjukta Das rightly says, "For men to talk of individualism, alienation, freedom and so on could be viewed as a laudable process of self making. In women this same attempt was often seen as disruptive and threatening to the notion of nation and family" (22). This might be the reason that whenever poets like Kamala Das has tried to write about her own self, it has created uproar as if her voice causes a threat to our conventional social system. She has always wanted to disturb this society.

It'll be my endeavour to show that these poets have been able to cause threat to the all emphasizing male-dominated society. The sole aim of their poems is to chip away the surface layer of an apparently blissful social structure which pretends to provide domestic bliss. The bunch of poems that I've chosen is linked by a single theme. I've chosen the poems which are either directly or indirectly related to their father. And it is not surprising to see that so many modern Indian Women English poets have written about their father in their poems. As if it has become a custom to express their respective relationships to their father.

However, an exploration into the theme will bring out how the modern poets have tried to change the contemporary outlook. Women's writing about women provides significant value. It brings a sharp distinction from male writing which is laden with male ego. However, these types of writings are given a coinage 'écriture feminine' by Helene Cixous. In her "Laugh of Medusa" she is extremely aggressive as well as optimistic about their new trend of writing:

I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same

fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement. (875)

This set of Indian poets using the mode of confession makes their agonies reachable to the readers. And simultaneously, the adoption of English language as their mode of expression instead of any regional language, in which they are equally fit to express, provides their 'unheard agonies' a considerable number of audience. Their spontaneous reach to Queen's language, in Kamala Das's voice:

The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its
queernesses
All mine, mine alone.
It is half English, half Indian, funny
perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings,
my
Hopes,... (" An Introduction" 13-19)

It gives these issues a wider perspective. Long nurtured tradition to make a woman subordinate in every sense is brought into light. These poets are not a part of privileged society, rather they themselves are also victim of the same tradition and therefore, it becomes much more evocative for them to narrate their experience firsthand. Sometime they may role-play, but it is not far away from the reality, rather by role-playing they want to generalize their individual experiences. The mode of confession provides them that space from where they can deliver their suppressive agonies uninhibitedly.

Confessional poetry, as suggested by Robert Philips, "... gives the naked emotion direct" (08). It is the spontaneous outcome of the subconscious memories. And when that part of subconscious is revealed it is seen that among almost all of the women confessional poets there are the memories of their father who appear in their poems. Poetry is not just a part of their life, rather it becomes their life. Perhaps, without that mode of expression they could have lost their sanity. That is why there is a therapeutic value of such type of poems. However, even we notice the presence of 'father' image in the poems of American pioneering confessional poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. In the poems all of these poets, irrespective of any socio-temporal barricade, the image of 'father' appear repetitively. The interpretation of the poems that I've selected will delve into the depth of the social problem that

forces these poets to express their relationship to their father.

Judith Harris in her *Signifying Pain* points out the confessional urge of a woman poet delivering her inner rage in her poems probes into this father-daughter relationship, "When female writers find a vehicle for expressing their long withheld anger and rage at the oedipal father in literary fantasy, the effect is both cathartic and therapeutic" (81). So, an obvious outcome of the relationship is healing for the tortured soul. However, not just this relationship but as we have already discussed, confessional poetry is having a therapeutic aspect, too. The process of psychoanalysis brings the patient to come closer to the inner suppressed state which is subsequently reawakened through the process of writing poems. And in this attempt the poet reconstructs his or her past, digs up his or her buried memories which has been causing his/her mental disturbances. In case of women poets the image of father bears a seminal influence in their lives. There is always a love-hate state; either heavenly or not so comfortable dealings go on between them. Judith Harris, however, moving on further, extends the prospect of confessional poetry, "Detailed recollections and narratives in which the damaged or weakened self is mobilized by expression, seek not only therapeutic outlets but also social accountability" (81). And this adherence to the social system takes this type of 'personal' poems out of just being narcissistic to the full extent. As these poems deal with very intimate and personal anecdotes, sometime turning into heaps of narcissistic images, there is always a chance to be rejected by severe criticisms. However, providing a contextual social link, these poems help themselves to be reinterpreted in multifaceted ways. *My Story* (1976), an autobiography of Kamala Das, emphasizes on the particular aspect which focuses on the subordination of women in our patriarchal social systems. The poems selected for my study, having 'father' images, press on that issue which shows father as a representative of patriarchs. Adrienne Rich in "Of Woman Born" very pertinently points out the same plight of woman in the hands of patriarchs:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men - by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour - determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. (57)

I've chosen Kamala Das's "A Requiem for My Father", Eunice De Souza's (1940-2017) "Autobiographical", Mamta Kalia's (1940-) "Tribute to Papa" and Melanie Silgado's(1956-) "For Father on the Shelf" for my study. Like Kamala Das, these poets seem to follow the changed mindset. Instead of writing in the same traditional vein, they choose to write about feminine problems and how to deal with that. However, this updated outlook doesn't distract readers from enjoying their poems. A detailed analysis of these poems will be helpful in the understanding of the topic of my discourse. In case of Kamala Das, apart from "A Requiem for My Father", there are several other poems which bear direct or indirect references of her father. It is worth noticing that usually Das tries to keep her poems limited to small size, but the poem of my study is distinctively of big volume. She expresses mixed feelings towards her father. In this regard we can refer to Plath's "Daddy" where there is the reference of Electra complex which, as proposed by Jung, points out to the psycho-sexual competition with her mother for possession of her father. But in Kamala Das's case the issue is having much more social values. Here the relationship is between the oppressor and the oppressed. Father acts like the dictator, the sole instructor. In *My Story*, the much disputed autobiography of Das, she explores the patriarchal domination to the highest degree. Her Nayar heritage is often referred and valued as possessing the dignified condition of women. But in Das's writings their hypocrisy has been unmasked and brought out before the readers. She remembers her father as one of those characters who has a tendency to subordinate women. He represents the stereo-typed Indian patriarchal figure accumulating in his practice the long-nurtured poison of male-domination which is reflected in his attitude towards his wife and subsequently on his daughter, too. A graphic description of him is enough to break the equipoise feeding our long-nourished tradition which enriches the super-hero image of a man, more particularly of a father in our conventional family. Apart from mentioning him in *My Story*, Das in an conversation with Merrily Weisbord, refers him as "cold and autocratic father" (22). Often he is mentioned as a self-declared protector who endeavours into the venture of guiding the women in his family without paying attention to their individuality. Though Nayar family was supposed to be a matrilineal one, inside the sanctum male-worshipping was a traditional norm. She told Merrily, "I come from a matriarchal society. Matriarchs are expected to look after husbands" (15). But in spite of that, her mother, Balamani Amma, a renowned poet, suffered a lot in the hand of her husband. It can be quoted from *My Story* where she gives

several instances which show her father, a devoted follower of Gandhi, acting like an oppressor to his wife:

My father soon after the betrothal stipulated firmly that his wife was not to wear anything but Khaddar and preferably white or off-white. After the wedding he made her remove all the gold ornaments from her person, all except the 'mangalsutra'. (11)

Das is well aware of that traditional practice that makes a habit of subordinating women since ages. Adopting confessional mode in order to express the unexpressed Das strikes at the root of the injustice. In *Love Queen of Malabar* she says:

“Since all my mother did was write, I emulated her...But having watched mother, grandmother, great grandmother, great-aunt suffer with a silence that did not protect them at all, I determined to write honestly. All the pain unexpressed and all the sad stories left untold made me write recklessly and in protest.” (25).

In the poem “A Requiem for Father” Das remembers her father after his death. A requiem is a song or human of mourning composed or performed as a memorial to a dead person. In this song of lamentation Das expresses her mixed feelings regarding her father. When he was living, she felt ‘dwarfish’, his giant stature relegated almost everything around him to the nonentity. She was so much submissive in his lifetime that even after his death his very degrading condition at the time of death seems very unsuitable to the stature of the man:

We tried so hard to hide your waist.
And , the catheter, hanging ,
when once the stampede , tugged off the
intravenous tube
we got the young intern to come in a
hurry.
To hack at your swollen feet and find yet
another
vein to pierce, of we tried so hard to
keep the prying out.
But They kept coming in droves to
watch the strong man die” (6-12).

The man, who once possessed a dignified position as the first Indian managing director of a British Luxury car company or later as the managing editor of *Mathrubhumi*, one of Kerala’s highest circulation Malayalam dailies,

suffered in his last days. Das remembers how she felt at that time, “we were tonguetied, humbled and quiet/ Although within we wept for you/ And more for ourselves, now without a guardian” (“A Requiem for Father” 21-23). When her father died she was not in literal sense a minor one who had to be taken care of. But still she feels that she becomes “without guardian” and this feeling is generated from the same practice of considering a father as the earning male member of a family, the sole source of power or the protector. The same image of “father” is poignantly presented in Sylvia Plath’s celebrated poem “Daddy”. Using the shoe imagery Plath mentions her father’s control that continues to dominate her for almost three decades of her life: “... black shoe/ In which I have lived like a foot/ For thirty years, poor and white, / Barely daring to breathe or Achoo”(2-4). Her normal growth had been stopped by the suffocating surveillance of her father. She finds herself stuck under the supervision of her father knowing that her father actually died long ago. So, it is not always that the father should be physically present, the concept itself is burdensome. In another poem “The Colossus”, the title poem of *The Collosus*, Plath reconstructs her father catering to the mythic dimension of a lost God. She describes this stone-made God of giant stature before whom she always finds herself dwarfed: “I shall never get you put together entirely, / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed” (1-2). This giant image of a father, which has been bestowed upon him by the traditional social practice, remains unreachable. And his whim to control and thereby overpowering everything around him to his own desire appears unmistakable. In Mamta Kalia’s title poem of her first volume, “Tribute to Papa”, this image of father is ruthlessly displayed, “you want me to be like you, Papa./ Or like Rani Laksmibai. /You’re not sure what greatness is / You want me to be great” (*Nine Indian Women Poets* 19-22). Mina Surjeet Singh rightly analyses, “The poem takes on the narrative form of a song of abuse, which opens with a direct address to the father, enumerates a series of patriarchal vices particularly those that affect her and through a categorical declaration of her independence, suddenly and unexpectedly closes on a note of concern” (171). However, Kalia in her poem negates the false image of her father and relegates him to almost nothing: “you are an unsuccessful man, Papa./ Couldn’t wangle a cosy place in the world./ You’ve always lived a life of limited dreams” (*Nine Indian Women Poets* 6-8) . This is a painful realization on daughter’s part who always dreamt about her father to break the shackles of ordinariness and reach above the label of petty conventionality. Like every child, the poet took her father as a superhero. But ultimately he was nothing but an ideal man, “But you’ve always wanted to be a model man, / A sort of an ideal”

(*Nine Indian Women Poets* 14-15). This statement is made as a direct attack to her father possessing patriarchal values to the core. The words 'model' as well as 'ideal' aim at the already -ordained protocols that have to be maintained in any male-dominated society. And poet's father, as it seems from her statement, wholeheartedly dedicated his life to continue as well as carry forward the baton of traditional values. When he found out that her daughter had an affair and she might have been pregnant due to that, he was thinking about committing suicide. Singh pertinently says, "The poem is a powerful expose of middleclass hypocrisy and established relationships and offers a witty and sardonic comment on rampant corruption and established values" (172). However, in this social system women are denied to opt for their own choice and they have to be satisfied with whatever can achieve without causing any damage to the age old values of male hegemony. But to Kalia, the act of writing provides her a space where she can unburden her suffered self and thereby feels released. In the poem Kalia makes a bold declaration of independence as a wish-fulfillment:

These days I am seriously thinking of
disowning you, Papa,
You and your sacredness.
What if I start calling you Mr. Kapur, Lower
Division Clerk, Accounts Section? (*Nine
Indian Women Poets* 25-29)

Disowning of 'father' caters to the broader aspect of denouncing the patriarch in him. And in this way Kalia kicks back to the male hegemony and acquires her own position in this society.

Melaine Silgado's "For Father on the Shelf" and Eunice de Souza's "Autobiographical" are in themselves a continuation of the same image of father. Bruce King rightly says, "Like many contemporary feminist writers both de Souza and Silgado are preoccupied with their relationship to their father" (160). In Silgado's poem the poet carries an intimate relationship with her father, "Father, you will be proud to know / You left something behind. / The year you died/ I inherited a mind" (*Nine Indian Women Poets* 1-4). However, this rebellious attitude is continued "from time to time/ I resurrected you". Though she is well aware about his indifference towards her, she always bear in her mind her father. She often resurrects him in her mind. In a tone of dramatic monologue the poet displays her love-hate relationship to her father. Bruce King says, "The poem develops around two conflicting emotions, her love for and shame of her father, "both villain and hero of the piece" (160). However, the poet vehemently protests patriarchal rules

and regulation which are meant to curb independence of women. The poet is successful in disobeying conventional social pattern, "wherever you are, will you/ turn your index finger away" (*Nine Indian Women Poets* 30-31). De Souza's "Autobiographical" is another confessional poem deals with the issues of being an unwanted child, early death of father, suicidal attempts and other personal details, "Right, now here it comes /I killed my father when I was three" (*Nine Indian Women Poets* 1-2). Here she gives an indirect hint and it appears that she doesn't have a comfortable relationship with her father. Somewhere there is a feeling of guilt in her mind. This image of 'killing' of father tries to obliterate that issue from her subconscious mind. 'Father' as a metaphor stands for ' power' that brings into its domain certain traits like ' authority' , ' control', ' dictatorship' etc. And this power is projected through the patriarchal attitude expressed by the male-centric social system. These poems try to explore the said metaphor.

Many other poems based on the same topic written by other women poets could be mentioned here. And they could be discussed in the same vein. However, the basic pattern remains same. The overwhelming nature of father-figure seems to control docile entities. And the major concern of present day feminist studies should be to free women from this constrain.

REFERENCES

- [1] Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa". Trans. Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1.4(1976): 875-893. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 June 2013. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239> >
- [2] Das, Kamala. *My Story*. 1988. Kottayam: D C Books, 2009. Print.
- [3] --- *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing: Selections from Kamala Das*. 1996. Kottayam: DC Books, 2007. Print.
- [4] Das, Sanjukta. *Derozio to Dattani: Essays in Criticism*. New Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2009. Print.
- [5] De Souza, Eunice, ed. *Nine Indian Women Poets: An Anthology*. 1997. New Delhi: OUP, 2001. Print.
- [6] Harris, Judith . *Signifying Pain: Constructing and Healing the Self through Writing*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003. Print.
- [7] Iyenger, K. R. S. *Indian Writing in English*. 1962. New Delhi: Sterling, 1985. Print.
- [8] King, Bruce. *Modern Indian Poetry in English*. Delhi: OUP, 2004. Print. Norton, 1976. Print.
- [9] Phillips, Robert S. *The Confessional Poets*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973. Print.
- [10] Plath, Sylvia. *The Colossus and Other Poems*. New York: Random House, 1962. Print.
- [11] Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood and Experience and Institution*. New York:
- [12] Singh Surjit, Meena. *Six Women Poets – A cross cultural*

study. New Delhi. Prestige Books,2003. Print.

- [13] Weisbord, Merrily. *The Love Queen of Malabar: Memoir of a Friendship with Kamala Das*. 2010. Gurgaon: Research Press, 2011. Print.