



Mamta Kalia's Poems' 78 : An Appraisal

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Mamta Kalia is an Indian English poet. Her first book of poems, *Tribute to Papa*, was published by Writers Workshop in 1970. But in this paper my focus is on her second book of verse, Poems' 78, which earned her some fame. My emphasis in this paper is on the aspects she has broached in this book.

Unlike female writers who write in order to overcome silence, Mamta Kalia is a writer who writes because she has appropriated writing as her weapon. If the poetic voice in her poems is to be attributed to her, she becomes a writer who indulges in shedding ears and punctuating them with words meant to thwart the march of male monolith. Being a female, her discontent is symptomatic of vegetating in a patriarchal world. A world where all positive attributes are generally associated with males. A world where female is regarded as a negative object or "other" to man as the defining and dominating "subject" who is assumed to represent humanity in general. She prefers to call this world "your world", where she has to stay content with stupidity. A world where female voice is afforded only the lexicon of irrationality:

You glare when I Come

And growl when I talk

And sulk when I'm num

And flown when I laugh

And swear when I cheer¹

This voice is irrational, incoherent, obscure because it dwells on female experience at workplace, experience of being born a female:



Experience of love that carves a housewife: experience of fighting defilement and experience of appropriating a pen. In her poetry, the poetic voice is more engrossed with personal experiences. Hence, we can call it a poetry of statement, a poetry of experience or poetry of plain confession. In this collection, through her experiences, she throws light on different aspects of life: marital relations and marital life, exploitation of woman in workplace and impact of urbanization on modern society.

Actually, Mamta Kalia is unable to escape illusions she took for reality. This keeps impinging her poetic canvas with children, family or workplace. She excessively speaks about marital relations in her poems. She presents a disappointing picture of married life. The speaking voice in her poems, depicting marital disenchantment, is unmistakably the poet herself. She makes her poetry a vehicle for the expression of her resentment against her husband. Married life has been an unpleasant experience for her. She seems to be a victim of illusions. So does she admit her foolishness.

I am a great fool

To think that marriage is bliss

Was it last month or last year

That we exchanged a kiss.

(“I, Am a Great Fool”, p.8)

She feels that it was her serious foolishness that has compounded her tragedy. She feels the lack of emotional bond in her marital relations. She feels herself alienated from her husband. The sordid reality of marriage leads to disillusionment, reconsideration of man-woman relationship and rebellion in her:



Let's not come close during intercourse

But mark a distance

Touch each other like dead wire

And react like fools.

(“Come”, p.11)

It sounds more like Kamala Das's “Freaks” that voices protest against the passivity of husband:

Can this man with

Nimble finger-tips unleash

Nothing more alive than the

Skin's lazy hungers.²

The sentiment is reiterated in Mamta Kalia's “ She worshipped the Shivlinga”: “she worshipped the shivlinga all her life/And spurned her husband in bed.” (“She Worshipped the Shivlinga”, p.17) Also, like Kamala Das, she sometimes unhesitatingly and fearlessly employs certain words which even a male author would shrink from employing: “ You mind everything that happens or does not happen to you/Rejection, Dejection, Erection.”

Again, Kamala Das's disenchantment with her husband's way of life:

Your room is

Always lit by artificial lights. Your

Windows always

Shut.³

Seems to anticipate Mamta Kalia's description of her disillusionment with her husband's way of living:



Had your father – whom you never

Considered wiser than an owl ---

Not left you this solid sixth floor flat,

A bulky bank-balance

Smooth sense of security

(“A Pretty Girl Crossed the Road”, p.14)

She craves for a perfectly shared conjugal bliss. She yearns for a complete involvement in each other’s life:

Let’s hold each other’s hand

And feel the buzzing of each other’s

blood

let’s walk all roads together

And not look back at the prints on mud.

(“Before Time Outlives Us”, p.12)

The tension between what she expected from marriage and what it turned out to be becomes the major cause of her frustration. She wants to cry at the loss of her dream and fading away of her song. She suffers at home because she is still hopeful of meeting her “prince debonair”. A prince who does not “glare”, “growl”, “Sulk”, “frown” or “nag” but one who will help her build “A Brand New World”. She finds herself trapped in a net of imposed relationships –



people related to her because they happen to be her husband's distant relatives. She is sick of the people around her and feels like reacting in different ways—to smash a glass early in the morning and wake up everybody with a start, to pretend ill when they ask her to work. She wants to “poison” everybody because she considers them the very cause of her “fainting song”;

While hosting meals

I want to poison everybody

....

Then I can hear that song

Which goes on inside me endlessly.

(“I Feel Like Crying All the Time”, p.19)

But she is helpless because she is not strong enough. It is her cowardice that leaves her only with a pen:

I write

Because I cannot bite

It's the way

The weak ones fight.

(“I Write”, p.15)



While telling her bitter experiences of marital life, she also focuses upon the hypocrisy and double life of married Indian women. In “ After Eight Years of Marriage”, seeing parents’ wrinkled hands, beaten faces, grey eyelashes, the lady swallows everything and smiles a “smile of content”.

The nature of her filial and familial relations finds expression in her poem “No, I’m No Pelican to My Sons”. She confesses she is not an all- sacrificing mother like the pelican who feeds her children on her blood, nor is she a dove to her love. She is just:

An antibiotic against all infection

A shot in the arm of the family

Hated though awaited

(“No, I’m No Pelican to My Sons”, p.8)

She even realizes that after a certain age, the bond between mother and child does not remain very strong. Then “you can’t adjust even with your own children” as they come to have their own individuality.

After revealing her family experiences, she delineates experiences of a woman outside house, that is, in her workplace. And she finds that she is a victim of sexist and biased attitude of society outside the house as well, be it the vocation of writing or a job in the office. She is always judged as a “woman” and the crisis deepens if she tries to widen her horizons. Any intellectual activity is not a traditional female bastion and the society is rigid in its views. Even at her workplace, the woman is never respected as an individual and her excellence lies in her willingness to oblige her male boss:



Here like a fool I've been working all along

When work is work's own defeat

My promotion waits on your naughty knees

Readiness is all I now need

(“how like a fool”, p.15)

She is presumed to be missing “dedication” for being ten minutes late. As the finer difference between “dedication” and “medication” dawns, she learns what “medication” her dedicated boss needs, and she refuses to be her “hamburger”

I suddenly knew he was angry no longer

But I wasn't in a mood to be his hamburger

So I asked for a charge sheet and came out.

(“Either you are born with it”,p.24)

Further, in this collection she paints with vividness the picture of modern city-life. The tragedy of modern man is that there is no Arcadia to escape into. Urbanisation has swallowed external Nature and the only open place, Mamta Kalia finds, is a “burning ghat” beyond the municipal limits. The poet feels happy where even the vultures and crows look sulky. Here she finds respite from her life full of “scowl, growl and howl” wherein she feeds” fissures on forehead with B.P.” In the cemetery, she is, at least, free from suffocation: “I don't gasp/When I breathe.”(“beyond the Municipal Limits”, p. 10). “City” has come to be the living symbol of impersonal, callous and inhuman modern life. The city kills our sense of



self-respect and all you can do is to shout in the middle of a street: “I am, I am”. But none will hear the cry and say “Don’t cry”. Emotional wasteland, as it is, the city squeezes out all warmth and compassion out of a person. Mamta Kalia sums up this feature of city-life thus:

In Delhi

The Sea

Could have really gone dry.

(“In Delhi”, p.11)

Modern man’s conditions are peculiar ones. His is a world where all- pervasive death, destruction, chaos and gloom are the order of the day.

No one expired in hospital

Today

What a day

(“No One Expired”, p.10)

After a close reading to the book, one can be in no doubt that her poetry registers protest. Anger, which is the result of her experiences, happens to be the defining tone of her poems. Her poems venture into depict different shades of anger: anger on not getting dalda, anger at being victoriously vegetating, anger on avoiding husband, anger at being suffocated in a family of twelve, anger at being made a housewife, anger at being infected by love and anger at polluted and corrupted modern city-life. The genesis of these different sorts of anger can be traced to her existence as a sexed entity in a male world. Her protest is against male



troops conditioning a woman to serve them as an object of desire. But her voice in some poems becomes nostalgic and this nostalgia is confined to youthful body-charm which is now lost: “My hair held a fragrance once/A fragrance you associated with flowers” (“My Hair Held Fragrance Once”, p.25). If Mamta Kalia is a feminist writer registering protest against father’s world, she should have tried to overcome this hangover of misreading her existence. She celebrates a body: that made her “the most successful missile”, that measured “thirty four-twenty-thirty four”, that modeled for a leading firm. This is the reason she constructs her poetry around her graceful past which is now lost. Her protest seems fragile, as it is made just for conforming to the prevalent trends in literature. Her poetic vision is unstable and it does not achieve aesthetic culmination. It is a poetry in absence of alternatives and turns into mere rhetoric.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Mamta Kalia, “ Love Made a Housewife Out of Me” in Poems’ 78 (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1978), p.21. Subsequently, all the textual quotations are from the same edition of the volume. In all such cases, the titles of the poems as well as the page numbers have been given in parentheses following the textual quotations.
2. Kamala Das, “ The Freaks” in The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (Madras: Orient Longman Ltd., 1973), p. 11.
3. Kamala Das, “The Old Playhouse” in The Old Playhouse and Other Poems, (p. 11).