

## **Chapter One**

### **Towards a Feminist Reading**

The advent of feminism as a global and revolutionary ideology has brought into the field of literary criticism new critical outlooks and modes of exegesis. The practice of reading of any literary text has become a site in the struggle for change in gender relations that prevail in society. A reading that is feminist aims at asking such rudimentary questions: how the text defines sexual questions, what it says about gender relations and how it represents women. In other words, feminist reading/criticism has come to be recognized as a political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism.

The influential feminist critic, Elaine Showalter points out that two factors - gender and politics- which are suppressed in the dominant models of reading gain prominence with the advent of a feminist perspective. In every area of critical reflection whether it is literary representations of sexual difference or the molding/shaping of literary genres by masculine values feminist criticism has established gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis. With gender as a tool of literary interpretation the issue of silencing of the female voice in the institutions of literature, criticism and theory has also come to the forefront. Appreciating the widespread importance of gender, feminist philosophers resist speaking in gender-neutral voice. They value women's experiences, interest, and seek to shift the position of women from object to one of subject and agent.

Moreover, it has been an important function of feminist criticism to redirect attention to personal and everyday experience of alienation and oppression of women (as reflected in literary texts). Traditional notion of politics is thus redefined so as to acknowledge the permeation of power relations into the most mundane social practices. The feminist concept of “personal is political” means that woman’s distinctive experience as woman occurs within that sphere that has been socially lived as the personal—private, emotional, interiorized, particular, individuated and intimate. Thus what it is to know the politics of woman’s situation is to know woman’s personal lives.

In her essay, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” Elaine Showalter categorizes two distinct modes of feminist criticism. The first mode, which is ideological, is concerned with the feminist as *reader*. Within the parameters of this mode lies the feminist readings of texts which are specifically male-authored. The focus is on “images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and women-assign in semiotic systems.”

<sup>1</sup>This mode of criticism which was practised in the earliest years of feminist criticism concentrated on exposing the misogyny of literary practice: the stereotyped images of women in literature as angels or monsters, the literary abuse or textual harassment of women in classic and popular as well as canonical texts. Showalter calls this mode the feminist critique. Such influential feminist texts from the late sixties and early seventies like Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, Ellen Moer’s *Literary Women*, and Mary Ellmann’s *Thinking About Women* paved the way for such critical approach. Millett’s *Sexual Politics* is in many ways the starting point from which feminist literary criticism originated. Millett uses literary texts to illustrate her

arguments about sexual politics. Through her analysis of the novels of male writers like Norman Mailer, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and Jean Genet she exposes their patriarchal bias and their sexual/textual harassment of women. Millett has also fiercely critiqued Sigmund Freud as a great supporter and perpetuator of patriarchal conspiracy against women. She challenges the author's authority and insists on the reader's right to express her own viewpoint. As Toril Moi observes, "Her approach destroys the prevailing image of the reader/critic as passive/feminine recipient of authoritarian discourse, and as such is exactly suited to feminism's political purposes."<sup>2</sup> Ellmann in her analysis shows that the Western culture at all levels is permeated by a phenomenon she labels as "thought by sexual analogy." Ellmann in the words of Toril Moi, "manages to demonstrate first that the very concept of masculinity and femininity are social constructs which refer to no real essence in the world, and second that the feminine stereotypes she describes invariably deconstructs themselves."<sup>3</sup> Ellen Moer had tried to show through her work how women's writing forms a subculture of marginalized sensibilities. Her work shows how woman writers share secret solidarities with other women and formulate strategies of resistance across various cultures. Millett's, Ellmann's and Moer's method has come to be known as "reading against the grain", which the feminist critics have used to great profit in their critique of the patriarchal discourse and ideology. Their influential books greatly influenced what is also known as "Images of Women" approach to literature and criticism inaugurating the first phase of feminist writing, which focuses attention on women as readers. Moreover, their analyses point to the ways in which women are represented as passive, masochistic and totally male-identified. Relationships with men are shown to dictate the

structuring principles of femininity and an unquestioned masculinity lays the boundaries for what women may or may not be. Women are depicted in ways, which meet particular forms of male interest, and women readers are encouraged to identify with traditional female gender norms of sensibility, passivity and irrationality.

The second mode of feminist criticism is the study of women as *writers*, and its subjects are the “history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition.”<sup>4</sup> Disturbed by the sudden realization that women had invariably been represented in stereotypical ways by a literary heritage that claimed universality, feminist critics turned to women authors for alternative images of women. As all literary theory is text-specific, feminist criticism in order to develop had to identify women’s writing as its distinctive text-milieu. Thus the second mode of feminist criticism is concerned with women’s writing, specifically with writing as a mode of resistance. In what Showalter terms “gynocritics,” the study of woman as writer, women are invited to speak for themselves, even if they continue to do so from within a patriarchal culture. Showalter’s “A Literature of Their Own” traces a female literary tradition in the English novel from the Brontes to the present day and demonstrates that the development of this tradition is similar to the development of any literary subculture. Her book is perhaps the most influential of the accounts of women’s writings in its difference from men’s. She identifies a female subculture in which fiction by women constitutes a record of their experience. She defines three separate but overlapping phases, feminine, feminist and female. The feminine phase is marked by imitation of prevailing masculine models, though concerns are

distinctively feminine. The feminist phase is one in which formulation of specifically feminist protests and demands become visible. And lastly the female phase is the phase of self-discovery and exploration of an inner space of female experience.

Today gynocriticism assumes that all writing is marked by gender. Although feminist critics recognize that meaning of gender needs to be interpreted within a variety of historical, national, racial and sexual contexts, they maintain that woman writers are not free to renounce or transcend their gender entirely. Women can differentiate their positions from any number of stereotypes of femininity, and define themselves also in terms of being black, lesbian, postcolonial or working class but to deny that they are affected by being women at all is self-delusion or self-hatred.

Gynocritics aim at constructing a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. As Showalter writes, "Gynocritics begins at the point where we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture."<sup>5</sup>

The shift from "feminist critique" to "gynocritics"—as emphasis on woman as reader to emphasis on woman as writer—has helped in developing a feminist criticism that is "genuinely woman-centred, independent, and intellectually coherent." To see women's writing as primary subject forces us to make the leap to a new conceptual vantage point and to redefine the nature of theoretical problem before it. It is no longer the ideological dilemma of reconciling revisionary pluralisms but the essential question of difference. Theories of women's writing presently make use of four models of difference: biological, linguistic,

psychoanalytic and cultural. As pointed out by Showalter each is an effort to define and differentiate the qualities of woman writer and woman's text.

Organic or biological criticism is the most extreme statement of gender difference. To some feminists a text is indelibly marked by the body: anatomy is textuality. Radical feminists both in France and the United States, insist and argue that "woman's writing proceeds from the body, that our sexual differentiation is also our source." In "Of Woman Born," Rich explains her belief that "female biology...has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource rather than a destiny. In order to live a fully human life, we require not only control of our bodies...we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, the corporeal ground of our intelligence."<sup>6</sup>

Referring to the body as a concrete object and as a signifier in social discourse of the unconscious Helene Cixous constantly exhorts the women to "write the body."

"By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her...Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time."

"Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth."<sup>7</sup>

"Writing the body" is an injunction to liberate the unconscious. Women, alienated from language, have been literally silenced. Unable to sublimate the libido into cultural achievements, woman is physicality incarnate. "More so than men who

are coaxed toward social success, toward sublimation, women are body. More body, hence more writing” (“The Laugh of the Medusa,” p. 886). Cixous maintains that the female body is also not fragmented, but a whole in which each part is a whole:

“not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros, an immense astral space not organized around any one sun that’s any more of a star than the others.”<sup>8</sup>

Cixous most often focuses upon the vagina and the breast—the source of the “white ink” with which women will write—as roots of her metaphors. Liquid products such as milk and blood abound. When she thinks of woman’s body, she says:

“I think in terms of overflow, in terms of an energy which spills over, the flow of which cannot be controlled.”<sup>9</sup>

Feminist criticism written in the biological perspective generally stresses the importance of the body as a source of imagery. This form of criticism which itself tries to be biological, to write from the critic’s body, has been intimate, confessional, often innovative in style and form. The study of biological imagery in women’s writing is useful and important since ideas about the body are fundamental to understanding how women conceptualize their situation in society.

Apart from the body concept, feminists (mostly in France) focus on the use of an appropriate female language. This is because they find the dominant mode of discourse as one marked by masculine ideology. According to Carolyn Burke, “when a woman write or speak herself into existence, she is forced to speak in something like a foreign tongue, a language with which she may be personally uncomfortable.”<sup>10</sup> The debate over language is one of the most exciting areas in

gynocritics. The concept of 'écriture féminine', the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text has developed as a significant theoretical formulation in French feminist criticism that aims at systematically deconstructing the "oppressor's language."

Cixous defines a woman's language as closer to the body, to sexual pleasure and asserts that this closeness to the body and to nature could be subversive. She contrasts feminine writing (l'écriture féminine) with masculine writing (littérature). She has objected to masculine writing and thinking because they are cast in binary oppositions. Man has unnecessarily segmented reality by coupling concepts and terms in pairs of polar opposites, one of which is always privileged over the other. In her essay "Sorties", Cixous listed some of these dichotomous pairs:

Activity/Passivity

Sun/Moon

Culture/Nature

Day/Night

Thought has also worked through opposition,

Speaking/Writing

Parole/Écriture

High/Low

through dual, hierarchical oppositions.

Superior/Inferior<sup>11</sup>

Cixous has challenged women to write themselves out of the world men have constructed for them by putting into words the unthinking/unthought. The kind of writing Cixous associated with men comprises the bulk of the accumulated



wisdom of humankind. Because these thoughts have been stamped with the official seal of approval, they are no longer permitted to move or change. Contrary wise, the kind of writing that she identified as woman's own-marking, scratching, scribbling, jotting down connotes movements like that of an ever-changing river. Thus, for Cixous, feminine writing is not merely a new style of writing, it is "the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural standards."<sup>12</sup>

While distinguishing between woman's writing from man's, Cixous draws many connections between male sexuality and masculine writing on the one hand and female sexuality and female writing on the other hand. Like male sexuality, which centers on the penis with all its pointedness and singularity masculine writings is marked by rigidity, repetition and monotony. Men write the same old things with their "little pocket signifier"-the trio of penis/phallus/pen. Contrary wise, feminine writing like female sexuality is open and multiple, varied and rhythmic, full of pleasures and possibilities. "Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours...She lets the other language speak—the language of 1000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death...Her language does not contain, it carries, it does not hold back, it makes possible."<sup>13</sup>

Luce Irigaray, like Cixous, defines masculine discourse as linear, systematic, logical, based on binary opposites. To contradict this discourse, to subvert the masculine, she advocates mimicry; "the woman deliberately assumes the feminine style and posture assigned to her...in order to uncover the mechanisms by which it

exploits her.”<sup>14</sup> Other ways of undoing masculine discourse are “disturbance, excess, simultaneity, fluidity.”

Psychoanalytically oriented feminist criticism locates the difference of women’s writing in the author’s psyche and in the relation of gender to the creative process. Many feminists believe that psychoanalysis could become a powerful tool for literary criticism. But feminists based in Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis must continually struggle with the problem of feminine disadvantage and lack. In Gilbert and Gubar’s view the nature and “difference” of women’s writing lies in its troubled and even tormented relationship to female identity; the women writer experiences her own gender as “a painful obstacle or even a debilitating inadequacy.” Cixous and Irigaray aim to undo the negative image of women in Lacanian theory, the cultural “repression of the feminine.” According to Lacan the position of the ‘I’, the subject, is the position of men, possessors of the positive symbol of gender, the phallus. Cixous’ work that aims at theorizing feminine writing deconstructs the Lacanian position. She asserts, “It is perhaps a *continuum* that is the most visible sign of a feminine libido. ‘In my texts there are no chapters, no ordered framework’; ‘what takes place is an endless circulation of desire’; feminine texts are ‘close to the voice’ and close to the unconscious; they seek to liberate what is suppressed by male desire to dominate, to order the world.”<sup>15</sup>

According to the American psychoanalyst, Nancy Chodorow because women act as mothers, girls are parented by a person of the same sex “women’s sense of self is continuous with others and that they retain capacities for primary identification.”<sup>16</sup> Her theory seeks to explain differences in the psychological development of girls and boys. She postulates that the experience of female mothering results in “more

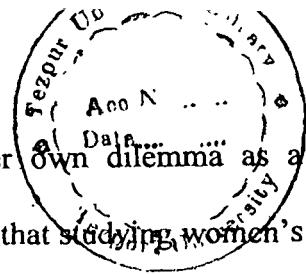
permeable ego boundaries” for women. Girls have to fight less to be different from their mothers, so they experience themselves as less separate than boys. As a result they define themselves more in relation to others, and have greater capacity for empathy with others. Extending Chodorow’s ideas to identity theory Gardiner states “female identity is a process,” and she proceeds to examine the consequences for writing by women. She proposes that “both writer and reader [of a text written by a woman] can relate to the text as though it were a person with whom one might alternatively be merged empathically or from whom one might be separated and individuated.”<sup>17</sup>

Showalter believes that a theory based on a model of women’s culture can provide a more complete and satisfying way to talk about the specificity and difference of women’s writing than theories based in biology, linguistics, or psychoanalysis. This is because a theory of culture besides incorporating ideas about women’s body, language, and psyche interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur. One implication of the cultural model of women’s writing is that women’s fiction can be read as a double-voiced discourse, containing a “dominant” and a “muted” story, what Gilbert and Gubar call a “palimpsest.” Critics who subscribe to the palimpsest theory believe that there is often a subversive message underlying most feminine writing.

Today the concerns, strategies, and positions associated with feminist readings of female texts are extremely wide-ranging. In general, the most common feature of this kind of reading is that the female reader speaks/reads as a witness in defense of the woman writer. The reader takes the part of the woman writer against patriarchal misreadings that trivialize or distort her work. A principal tenet of

feminist criticism is that a literary work cannot be understood apart from the social, historical, and cultural context within which it was written. Another feature of feminist reading of women's writing is the tendency to construe the text not as an object, but as the manifestation of the subjectivity of the absent author-the "voice" of another woman. The written text is the doorway to the "mind" of the author and the reader ought to evoke the person who lives at the heart of the text. To read any woman/feminist writer is to hear her voice, to make her live in oneself, and to feel her impressive "personal dimensions". However, it is worth noting here that there is a strong counter-tendency, inspired by French poststructuralism, which privileges the appreciation of textuality over the imaginative recovery of the woman writer as subject of the work. According to Mary Jacobus, "Perhaps the question that feminist critics should be asking is not 'Is there a woman in this text?' but rather: 'Is there a text in this woman?'"<sup>18</sup>. If feminist readings of male texts are motivated by the need to disrupt the process of immascultation, feminist readings of female texts are motivated by the need "to connect," to recuperate or to formulate the 'context, the tradition, that would link women writers to their readers. The reader on her part encounters not simply a text, but a "subjectified object": the "heart and mind" of another woman. In other words, in the paradigm of a truly feminist reading of a woman's text, the dialectic of control which shapes feminist readings of male texts gives way to the dialectic of communication. For a feminist reader reading is a matter of "trying to connect" with the existence behind the text.

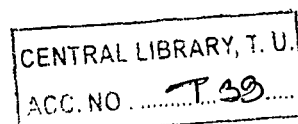
Though in this thesis I take the feminist perspective to analyse Kamala Das's writings, I should admit that there are various problems for a feminist literary criticism. One tendency is to form a ghetto, to assume that what makes a work



'valuable and interesting is its author's awareness...of her own dilemma as a woman'<sup>19</sup> (Montefiore). A frequent attack on gynocriticism is that studying women's writing is 'separatist,' that is, that it practices a kind of inverse sexism. K.K. Ruthven, for example, claims that gynocriticism repeats the mistake for which feminists take 'male critics to task, namely 'an exclusive preoccupation with the writings of our sex.'<sup>20</sup> Some critics tend to emphasize that women themselves are the best readers of women's texts and men should not be allowed to intervene. According to Annette Kolodny, "However inadvertently, [the male reader] is a *different kind* of reader and,...where women are concerned, he is often an inadequate reader."<sup>21</sup> But in so far as the female aesthetic suggests that only women are qualified to read women's texts, feminist criticism ran another risk of ghettoization.

Another problem is the tendency to refuse to consider the historical and cultural context of the writers. Still another is the tendency to accept a biological essentialism. When feminists talk of women's writing originating from the 'body' there is the risk of returning to crude essentialism by invoking anatomy. As for instance, when feminist critics and writers speak of women's writing flowing from them like their milk the position is no better or different than of those men who equate the pen with the phallus. Finally, one must try to avoid reading a work by any author as simply an expression of unmediated personal experience.

In spite of all these theoretical hazards and entrapment one cannot easily deny the fact that the body of work Kamala Das has produced lends itself particularly well to thematic explication in terms of feminist themes. Therefore, in this thesis my concerns are fundamentally thematic. That is, I am less concerned



with how Kamala Das writes than with what she writes about, for I believe her subjects are, a reflection of the *feminine* condition. It appears that Kamala Das's writings emerge as a fusion of Showalter's *feminist* and *female* stages signaling an osmotic reciprocity between the two distinct yet overlapping phases. The search for autonomy runs parallel to the search for identity and self-realization in all her writings. She takes the woman as the individual not as the 'other' and places her in a social setting, faced with a choice that is private and personal. A recurrent theme in her is the woman's resistance to the efforts of the patriarchal community to force her into a social role at the cost of her own identity.

As a woman poet, she writes most readily about the things she knows "marriage, love, maternity." But quite unlike her contemporaries she uses poetry as a means to explore sensual or sexual matters, and imagines a radical sexual revolution for herself. She addresses the problem of realizing female autonomy in a male-dominated society thereby raising the nature of male-female relationships to the level of conscious critique. The political value of self-scrutiny and self-disclosure is explicitly asserted in almost all of her writings. Her writing is full of verve and indignation, almost spilling over itself in its attempt to expose, chide and deride patriarchal norms and values. While her writings like all other confessional writings cannot attain the goal of total intimacy and authenticity aspired to, they can nevertheless serve to articulate some of the specific problems experienced by women both communally and individually and play a role in the process of identity formation and cultural critique.

Thematic analysis of her work clearly indicates that the "self" which she portrays is assertive but at the same time marked by contradictions, schisms, and

tensions. The conflicts and contradictions she expresses are not only related to the more general problematic of subjectivity, but also to the specific conditions of marginalization and powerlessness that have shaped both her public and private experiences. What makes the thematic approach relevant is that through it we can easily comprehend the strategic use of the confessional tone in her writings. The confessional tone highlights the poetic persona's quest for love and freedom, her dilemma and moral conflicts and also served to articulate some of the specific problems experienced by average Indian women in the patriarchal social set-up with all its pseudo hierarchies of phallogocentric norms and values.

However, many critics believe that confession is less concerned with making an explicit political point than in "telling all," with the cathartic release which accompanies speaking about that which has been kept concealed and silent. But in the Indian context Kamala Das's cathartic act serves a political purpose since she had been working on a plane of representation where women's bracketed lives struggle to achieve visibility. The expressiveness of her work and the signifying part of it come through devising a body that actually lives and moves wrapped in its envelope of flesh, working out its sexuality in narrative of promiscuity, incest and other forms of transgression. There is a continual play with taboo and a testing out of passion and profanation. Moreover, Kamala Das's writings clearly show how she plays at representing the world on an 'as if ticket', as if she were an aggrieved child, a betrayed lover, a frustrated wife, a reluctant nymphomaniac, a lesbian, a transvestite, a narcissist. Though all these appear as 'false maturities,' but by testing different skins she hopes to break the mould of social roles assigned to the woman.

In other words, Kamala Das actively revolts against cultural expectations of 'what women should be.' Most of her writings can be re-viewed as literary representations, which depict and subvert stereotypical images of women. An analysis of her autobiography shows that she relegates conventional life and concerns of women to a subordinate place, treating them as sources of constraints and difficulty. An overarching paternalist ideology and authority determined her choices and rewards, but she contrived her own resistance to it.

The feministic emancipatory impulse reflected in all her writing—poetry, autobiography, short stories—constitutes an essential difference between her and other writers of India. Eunice de Souza is perhaps right when she points out that it is a political act to write “explicitly about one’s feelings and needs as an individual in a social situation where the individuality of women is subjugated to their social role.”

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