

A POSTMODERN FEMINIST INTERPRETATION OF THE USAGE OF ELLIPSES IN THE POETRY OF KAMALA DAS

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Abstract:

*This paper will attempt to understand a postmodern feminist interpretation of the usage of ellipses in the poems *An Introduction* and *The Dance of the Eunuchs* by Kamala Das. The focus of this paper would be to understand the problem of marginalization of the language used by women and how Kamala Das deliberately and conspicuously employs ellipsis as a tool to articulate a rebellion against the patriarchal hegemony over language. The sign of ellipsis allows Das to articulate elements of human consciousness in its truest form, which language fails to express. As a rule, in informal sentences, ellipsis can be used to indicate silence or trailing off thought. She uses the idea of silence in her poetry to write something which cannot write and translate long-silenced female reality into a new linguistic destiny. To prove this argument, a postmodern feminist approach with the theories of Julia Kristeva's idea of semiotic politics; Helene Cixous' idea of *écriture féminine* and Sandra Gilberts' and Susan Gubers' idea of sexual linguistics would be used. Moreover the paper also shows the influence of Virginia Woolf in the writings of Das.*

Keywords: *Ellipsis, Kamala Das, An Introduction, The Dance of the Eunuchs Postmodern Feminism, Patriarchy.*

Introduction

Language is a medium which contains many features that reflects its role as the instrument through which patriarchy finds expression. It is important to acknowledge that men have acted individually and collectively as gatekeepers of language practices in their formal capacities as editors, administrators, adjudicators, and teachers, as well as in their roles as fathers, brothers, and husbands. It is also important to acknowledge that women (like men) caught within the hegemony of patriarchal discourse regulate themselves, each other, and their children, linguistically. But individuals (men and women alike) have also resisted, challenged, and circumvented the rules, traditions, and also resisted, challenged, and circumvented the rules, traditions, and customs, that have restricted women's access to certain language practices.

The grammar and lexicon of language is also seen as problematic for women, and has been a more difficult issue to address than women's silence in the public domain. Virginia Woolf in her essay *A Room of One's Own* argues that the use of language is so gendered that there is no common sentence ready for the use of women. It has been suggested that traditional narrative structure with its single authoritative storyteller, well-motivated characters, single crucial conflict deterring the protagonist from some ultimate goal, and the quick movement to closure reflects patriarchal mastery in culture. Such a rigid structure, whether the product of social relations or of an inherent psychosexual history, is often considered inadequate by some for representing women's experience (Friedman and Funchs, 1989). If normative language can be seen in some way male-oriented, the question arises whether there might be a form of language which is free from this bias, or even in some way oriented towards the female. In such a scenario, the relevance of 'gynocriticism' is highly significant.

'Gynocriticism' or 'gynocritics' is the term coined by Elaine Showalter to describe a new literary project intended to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature. Kamala Das is an

important writer in this literary project who through her poetry articulated a rebellion which shook the roots of the conservative Indian society. Das penned down her poetry in a way in which she achieved the dream of a language freed from the dictatorship of patriarchal speech. A major concept in 'gynocriticism' is the French notion of *écriture féminine*. The literal translation of this term means "feminine writing" or "women's writing," but theoretically speaking it refers to various forms of narrative that diverge from the linear, univocal narrative characteristic of its counterpart namely, masculine writing. Critics like Helene Cixous argues that a true feminine text is where there is an outpouring of language as a fantasy where the writer disgorges almost everything that is in her mind. The writer of a gynotext employs both body language and resonant silence through the usage of blank pages, gaps, borders, spaces and ellipses to overthrow the hierarchal sets of binary oppositions, which thinkers like Cixous and Irigaray see as the basic structures of patriarchal form of writing.

A predominant method that Das chose to create new forms of narrative employed the ellipsis, the literal orthographic ellipsis, signified by three spaced periods placed between words. In her texts, the ellipsis mark progressed from its orthodox meanings as a mark of punctuation to its incarnation as a sign and as a morpheme. Das sought to bring into her text the reality of feelings and intuitive understanding, elements of human consciousness, for which there is often not a name, not a word. Das used the technique of elliptical construction by placing the material dots into the material of the text, in order to create a literal space of silence. She used silence as a tool to rebel against the patriarchal hegemonic structure of language.

Kamala Das in her poems *Introduction* and *The Dance of the Eunuchs* extensively uses ellipses as a tool to rebel against the patriarchal hegemonic structure of language which deprives woman of her linguistic authority. The employment of ellipses in the poetry of Das provides her a trajectory to express silence as a symbol of her refusal to limit language to a linear, objectified and generalized one.

The objectives of the present research are to understand the postmodern feminist approach of the extensive usage of ellipses in the poetry of Kamala Das, to make the readers aware of the existence of a patriarchal hegemony in the usage of language, to introduce the concept of *écriture féminine through this paper and to provide an argument that the extensive usage of ellipses in the poetry of Kamala Das becomes a symbol of her rebellion against the structured male-oriented style of writing.*

In Kamala Das' poetry the extensive usage of ellipses provides a critical space to analyze how she as a woman translated a long-silenced female reality into a new linguistic destiny. The patriarchal society through the usage of language defines women as the 'other' since for them maleness is the norm. According to De Beauvoir no woman in this society can act outside of this constriction. Kamala Das in her poem *An Introduction* expresses a similar struggle wherein she is not even allowed to write in a language which voices her joys, her hopes and her dreams. The struggle of Das gets expressed in the following lines:

Don't write in English, they said, English is
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? (7-11)

Men write in a 'marked' language whose hierarchy of syntax, vocabulary and grammar are so structured that women feel that there is no sentence ready for her use. Helene Cixous' Medusa, which functions as a metaphor for woman's multiplicity, provides a new rhetorical landscape that opposes the hierarchical rules imposing restrictions on the female voice and body. "Like the many serpents writhing on the medusa's head, woman expresses a multifaceted sexuality that defies structure. As a 'Medusa', she enters language through the many locations of feminine desire uninhibited by sexual, historical, or linguistic roles that reduce and efface her" (Cixous, K. Cohen and P. Cohen, 5).

Kamala Das became more dominant in the field of literature by using female sexuality as her subject. In the poem *An Introduction*, Das writes in an explicit way about her sexuality:

I was child, and later they
 Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
 Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair.
 When I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
 For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
 Bedroom and closed the door, He did not beat me
 But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
 The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.
 I shrank Pitifully. (26-34)

In the above lines, she uses her sexuality as a tool to express her suppressed state of mind.

And in the other poem *The Dance of the Eunuchs*, Das through the lines “And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy” (12) implies that a woman has the freedom to write about her sexuality. Through her poetry I argue, Kamala Das negates the concept of phallogentrism, a concept which deems every kind of language, other than what is used by men, including women's language to be marginal and insignificant.

This marginalization of the language used by women has a deep root in the society because from childhood, a person gets inadvertently tuned to the patriarchal hegemony in language. Lacan's emphasis on the role of language in psychic formation, through which the child is separated from its primary relationship and placed in the network of a gendered symbolic system centered upon the father as the representative of sociality and power. Social organization channels the infant's libido into substitute gratifications, but also leaves behind a surplus of permanent unsatisfying desires. Julia Kristeva associates psychic repression with the actual structures of language, which she takes as the basics of culture by making an analogy between the entry into the symbolic and anthropological concept of the passage from nature to culture.

Kamala Das breaks free from this psychic repression by writing her poetry in a language which is fluid and links her sentences in loose sequences, rather than in a carefully balanced style as in male prose. Grammar and memory, authoritative and paternal, are broken up so that a new return to the fusion with the mother can arise. In the following lines of Das' poem *The Dance of the Eunuchs*, her breaking of rigid grammatical and authoritative structures can be clearly seen: “Their voices Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of Lovers dying and or children left unborn....” (Das 11-12).

The extensive usage of ellipses in her poetry characterizes her sentences as 'women's sentences'. As a rule, in informal sentences, ellipses can be used to indicate trailing off thought. It can also indicate hesitation. But Das uses it as a tool to break the hegemony of patriarchy over language.

Elaborating on the idea of patriarchy, Levi-Strauss believed that there are rules of human reactions and culture centred on binary oppositions like good/bad, male/female, up/down. Learning the language containing these binaries, one is not free to think outside its confines. Kamala Das rebels against the mainstream notions of the society and talks about the marginalized group of the society- the eunuchs in her poem *The Dance of the Eunuchs*. She describes in detail the condition of the transgender in a society wherein they are deemed as the 'other'. Through her usage of ellipses in the lines “Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling/ Jingling...” (Das 2- 3) and “They dance, oh, they danced till they bled...” (Das 6) she seeks to overthrow the Derridean sense of binary oppositions by speaking about the people who are considered inferior in the society just because they do not belong to the male sex. Das reverses the hierarchies of the society which deprave her of her linguistic authority. In such a reversal, the silence indicated by the usage of ellipses becomes a speech, and the body complementarily, becomes a speechifier.

According to Cixous, man's writing is filled with binary oppositions but woman's writing has a lot of scribbling, jotting down and is constantly being interrupted by life's demands. She also relates feminine writing to female sexuality and women's body concepts. Her idea is that development of this kind of writing will change the rules that currently govern language and ultimately the thinking processes and the

structure of society.

Kamala Das counters Freud's model of passivity for women through her poetry by offering her characters uninhibited freedom through both body and mind. In the poem *An Introduction*, Das revolts against the constructed 'passivity' of women through her words: "Then ... I wore a shirt and my/ Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored/ My womanliness" (33-34). In her other poem *The Dance by the Eunuchs*, Das by giving action to the marginalized section of the society overthrows the hierarchal sets of patriarchy through the following lines:

It was hot, so hot, before the eunuchs came
To dance, wide skirts going round and round, cymbals
Richly clashing, and anklets jingling, jingling
Jingling... Beneath the fiery gulmohur, with
Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
They dance, oh, they danced till they bled...(1-6)

Julia Kristeva in her essay "The limits of a semiotic politics" (Jones 1984) argues that "in woman there is something that can neither be represented nor be said. There is something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies. This makes the language written by women go off in all directions in which a man is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning" (Kristeva 34). The heart of a woman is an empty cistern filled with silence rather than with hopes and desires (Gilbert and Gubers, 24). This silence gets portrayed in the extensive usage of ellipses in the poetry of Kamala Das.

Michael Foucault argues that madness results from enforced silence and that one who cannot articulate herself within the dominant discourse is doomed to silence, and this enforced silence leads to what is wrongly termed madness. Subversion of the dominant discourse in which one is trapped is the only path to escape from this dilemma (Foucault 1965).

It is time to choose,
A different name
Don't play pretending games.
Don't play at schizophrenia or be a
Nympho (41-45)

Virginia Woolf as a predecessor of Das, and more than that as a woman who is trapped to write in a man's language, found a method of undermining that dominant discourse by subverting the obsession of learned men to name, to rebel, to define, and by reducing a world of feelings, passion and intuition into mere words. She developed a method literally to place into a written text that could not be written (Woolf, Bell, McNeillie 1983).

For Kamala Das, the incorporation of the technique of using ellipses allowed her to express her emotions in its truest form. The sign of ellipsis allowed Das to articulate elements of human consciousness in its truest form, which language fails to express. This gets clearly portrayed in the following lines, where Das articulates through ellipses the miseries of those people, which the society considers as outcasts. "Their voices were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of Lovers dying and or children left unborn...." (9-10).

The English language has thus absorbed a new sign which no traditional word could do: the ellipsis mark signifies the absence of a sign. Ellipsis has become the new 'word' for what words cannot contain and for what words are incapable of expressing. Ellipsis has become the new word which signifies words that are 'inexpressible' and 'uncontained'. It has become more than the mere absence of words or signs, because signs which are not present do not signify. Yet the ellipsis mark signifies the presence of nothing, an absence of a sign but not the absence of the signified, its meaning.

It is difficult and impossible to write in words what the ellipsis mark "means" because its meaning

is derived largely (though not entirely) from its context. Moreover ellipsis means something that cannot be expressed in words. In the following lines of the poem *Introduction*, ellipsis actually helps the poet to articulate her innermost conflicts, which words fail to express:

Don't cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love ... I met a man, loved him. Call
Him not by any name, he is every man
Who wants. a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love. In him . . . the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me . . . the oceans' tireless
Waiting. (45-51).

In the above poem Das talks about how a woman is disillusioned with her life and how she yearns for true love. But her desire for love gets suppressed by her dominant husband and the society. Das in her autobiographical book *My Story* writes how she as a young wife of sixteen felt emotionally beaten by her husband and how she had waited eagerly for the experience of true love all her life. The ellipses in the above lines signify the poet's wait for love and her disillusionment with life as she was constantly deprived of affection.

The paradox of the ellipsis is similar to the dilemma created by any attempt to write about deconstruction. To explain about Derrida's *différance*; one cannot write "*Difference is*" but only "*Difference is*". The ellipsis is an empty space, not the container of meaning, but the space where meaning occurs. While talking about the ellipsis in Das' poems, one can talk around it, about it, but it will always, by definition, escape definition. As with Derrida, one must write that "The ellipsis is"; perhaps one should rather write that the ellipsis"

The result of Kamala Das' usage of ellipsis was a 'woman's sentence', one not hardened and set by convention but one free to respond to the reader. The particularly feminine form of sentence is a form of discourse which in contemporary terms has come to be called *écriture féminine*. The dominant discourse of men sentencing and women complying, ordered reality into a linear, logical sequence of signs and demanded that the reader signify accordingly. The reader was not only to respond, but to respond "correctly", according to the writer's intentions, else they did not understand.

The ellipses under consideration are importantly authorial silence and the ellipses used to punctuate are twice removed from authorial voice. And to distinguish these meaningful silences from mere gaps in the text, one must account for the sign called ellipses and distinguish it from its parent, the dash. The concept of an ellipsis in written language has existed almost as long as written language but the ellipsis under discussion, the three dots (...) has existed as an orthographic symbol for little more than one century (18).

In that time, the ellipsis has become a much-used tool in literary works. For an author ellipsis is more than mere punctuation. The author has no need for a mark which indicates an omission, unless the omission itself is meant to be a part of the text. Ellipsis literally does not only represent the implied words which are apparently left out. An author has no need to imply only the words which could be present in the text; their absence speaks as loudly as their presence. The ellipsis perhaps cannot be called a "word", but it can be, and in Kamala Das' works must properly be called a "sign". More precisely it may be designated a "morpheme" by definition and, more relevantly, a non-word morpheme (19).

The ellipsis mark functions as a morpheme and is defined as the smallest meaningful unit of a language. The ellipsis must further be defined as a bound morpheme, one which cannot express meaning without the help of at least one other morpheme for context. And it is useful to consider ellipsis as a sign, and consider how the value or meaning of that sign is constituted (11).

In his seminal work, Ferdinand De Saussure illustrates this process by suggesting an analogy from the game of chess: When is a knight a Knight? Is it still an element in the game, if you carry it around your

pocket?

Certainly not, for by its material makeup outside its square and the other conditions of the game it means nothing to the player; it becomes a real concrete element only when endowed with value and wedded to it. (110)

An ellipsis mark by itself, without context, is simply a mark of punctuation. However when it is placed into any context, it becomes meaningful in the same manner as other signs. Words become meaningful in the same manner as other signs. Words may signify both sound and fury, but the ellipsis, in essence, signifies nothing (20).

For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door, He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.
I shrank Pitifully.
Then ... (28-34)

To understand the correct meaning of ellipsis in the above lines, the reader has to know about the past of Das. She was married at the age of sixteen to a much older man who did not love her as she expected from him. The lines portray her disillusionment in her marriage life, where she was not allowed to express herself. It is in this context that the reader has to interpret the meaning of the above ellipsis.

The origin of the word ellipsis is rooted in Latin, but does not become applied to the dots until the twentieth century. But the ellipsis comes into its own during the nineteenth century, perhaps in part because of the popularity of letter writing and the use of perhaps ink conserving dots instead of dashes. The dash also performed the function of allowing one to pause during the composition of an essay or a letter without letting the ink completely dry on the nib of the pen. Thus informal writing of the nineteenth century is rife with dashes because of the popularity of letter writing, where several dots often replace the stroke (Bowers 30).

Throughout her poems, Das searches for that truthful method of recording life. But as she attempts to capture reality, and as she often complains of in her work, she always finds the language lacking. She struggles with the impediments of words and particularly with the "man's sentence." She discovers one way to avoid that sentence; she simply does not allow it to be carried out. Das' dissatisfaction with language is similar to that experienced by Virginia Woolf, especially as the novels of male writers of her own time, was longstanding. As early as 1917, Woolf complained that she found the form of the novel to be, perhaps like men, "frightfully clumsy and overpowering" (*Letters II*: 167).

The term Woolf coined, "a woman's sentence," still has not been sufficiently defined despite the wide-ranging attempts, from empirical linguistics to intuitive poetics. On the one hand, in the words of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "no serious research into empirical linguistics has definitively disclosed what might be the special traits of 'a woman's sentence' or has even revealed those secondary sexual characteristics which define Woolf's normative 'man's sentence'" (229).

On the other end of this spectrum, some highly regarded feminist writers struggle to represent the idea of a "woman's language" by approaching the concept poetically. Gilbert and Gubar call these attempts "immoderately mystical," citing Luce Irigaray's description of women's language as always "in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them" (230).

In Das' case, she is one among the many writers in the subset who shares a largely feminine trait of exclusion by a predominantly masculine, authoritative, and linear language. As well, one must balance an analysis between the purely linguistic, quantitative approach on the one hand, and an abstract "immoderately mystical" conception on the other. In moderate terms, then, the ellipsis is an originally

feminine incursion into, or subversion of, the patriarchal language in which a woman must write (38).

Conclusion

Language is an important medium through which society expresses patriarchy. A close look at literature across ages reflects the failure of dominant language practices to reflect or serve the interests, perspectives and experiences of women. The problem of women and language is depicted in the poems *An Introduction* and *The Dance of The Eunuchs* by Kamala Das, where she shows how women's usage of language has been and continues to be channelled, considering the sexism inherent in grammar, structure and form of language. Das contorted and challenged the dominant discursive practices in order to represent the experiences of women in a perspective outside of gendered power relations. All women face this task to some extent, but for women writers like Das who chose to write deliberately, conspicuously, and subversively as women, a category intersected by class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, the task is formidable.

The concept of *écriture féminine* allowed writers like Kamala Das to employ various forms of narrative that diverge from the linear, univocal narrative characteristic of its counterpart namely, masculine writing. Das uses the idea of silence in her poetry which contains an essence of meaning which is part of her desire to use a form which allows her to write the unwritable in the same manner that Virginia Woolf believed a person (at least a woman) could communicate clearly and effectively without speaking. The form of ellipsis allowed Das to string words around upon her meaning without touching and tainting it with a concrete representation. She carefully manipulates narrative and narrative silences to focus the reader's attention on questions of gender, particularly on the manner in which male authority shapes women's lives.

Kamala Das like Virginia Woolf was only reiterating the conscious intention of Dorothy Richardson's attempt to write a new kind of realism and to produce a feminine equivalent of the current masculine realism. So Das realized that she could say more by saying less and the usage of ellipsis helped her to carry into the text the meaningful reality which she did not find in the texts of the action-oriented male authors. Moreover, the element of absence found expression, and the construction of a presence for absence became embodied in the mark of ellipsis.

Das' refusal to limit language to a linear, objectified and generalized one found expression in the form of ellipses that acts as her tool to rebel against the patriarchal hegemonic structure of language which deprives woman of her linguistic authority. The ellipsis mark in the poems *An Introduction* and *The Dance of the Eunuchs* marks not only the uncertainty of language but also provide a postmodern feminist expression of a revolutionary movement against the masculine rhetorical structure that has defined language over time.

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