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Portrayal of the Urban – Rural Conflict in Kamala Das' *A Hot Noon in Malabar*

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ABSTRACT

The studies based on Malabar apart from the colonial interpretations were not encouraged. The reason behind this inhibition of exploring the life of Malabar was that it was portrayed as a Muslim populated area with communal tensions in between the different religions in the region. This was created as a result of the colonial portrayal of the Malabar resistance of 1921 as a communal riot which the Muslims of the region massacred the Hindu population based on communal grounds. This colonial historiography influenced the history of postcolonial India and Malabar was relegated to the margins of mainstream discussions. So basically the poem *A Hot Noon in Malabar* is portrayed as a poem which discusses the alienation of women in Malabar because of the rural-urban transition. It also portrays the cultural and religious concurrency existing in the Malabar region. The transition of women and the cultural existence of the region are entangled and it is tough to separate the both to study or analyse in isolation.

Keywords: Religion, postcolonialism, communal tensions, transition, alienation.

Kamala Das, one of the prominent figures in Indian English literature, spoke to the global world through her poetry in English and she expressed her inner feelings through the prose works in Malayalam. She has accomplished

in exploring the innermost feelings of human psyche and has portrayed the manifestations of women psychology touching upon the most intricate aspects of women in the patriarchal society and even 'questions the sexual aspect of

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marriage' (Nayar, 2008). Her poetry discussed the minute particulars of both the life of women in the society and the fragrance of the specific region where she lived her life as a representative of the suppressed women in the patriarchal atmosphere. Her poems challenged the established notions of expressions so far existed in the genre of Indian English poetry and she proclaimed herself as a poet who spoke of herself focusing on the most intimate feelings which the women dared to express in the mainstream society. She gives an '...awareness of women having been subjected to all kinds of discrimination: social, cultural, political, (and) sexual' (Chandra, 2004). She enriched the field of confessional poetry as her voice was visible and audible to the eardrums of the whole community of women all around the world.

Her poems are much discussed on the basis of feminist perspectives, voices against the male dominant society and religious fundamentalism. But the poem *A Hot Noon in Malabar* is not much explored by the mainstream literary academia. The reason behind this lack of exploration of the particular poem is that it is a poem which throws light on the specific life of a region in Kerala geography called Malabar. The explanation of the poem and the possibility of analysis based on the geographical peculiarity was not much done basically because of the backwardness of the region in many aspects. Since Malabar was painted with the communal colour even from the colonial times the other regions both in Kerala and outside the state attention was not given towards the life of people in Malabar and their cultural significance. The studies based on Malabar apart from the colonial interpretations were not encouraged. The reason behind this inhibition of exploring the life of Malabar was that it was portrayed as a Muslim populated area with communal tensions in between the different religions in the region. This

was created as a result of the colonial portrayal of the Malabar resistance of 1921 as a communal riot which the Muslims of the region massacred the Hindu population based on communal grounds. This colonial historiography influenced the history of postcolonial India and Malabar was relegated to the margins of mainstream discussions. So basically the poem *A Hot Noon in Malabar* is portrayed as a poem which discusses the alienation of women in Malabar because of the rural-urban transition. It also portrays the cultural and religious concurrency existing in the Malabar region. The transition of women and the cultural existence of the region are entangled and it is tough to separate the both to study or analyse in isolation.

The poem is the depiction of the peculiarity of the noon in the Malabar region and this is basically said when the poet experience the happenings of Malabar in her childhood. The poem begins with the explanation of different types of visitors, wayfarers, acquaintances which the child engages in her house especially at the noon time. The poet juxtaposes the difference in between the atmosphere of the rural sides with that of the urban side especially at the time of noon. The first portrayal is of beggars coming to the ancestral house of Kamala Das when she was a child. The beggars in Malabar varied in different aspects as they included both the members from the native regions and from different states of the country. Since Malabar consisted of different varieties of geographical significance it is abundant with forests and the people dwelling inside the forest lands as tribal. So the beggars who came to the Malabar region to seek their livelihood and sustenance were not only expecting the alms from the households but they were also keeping a tradition expecting the charities from the well to do families, especially the tribal community who were living in the Malabar regions. This tradition

carried even from the colonial times in Malabar and the tribal men made specific sounds to attract the attention of the member of households and they always kept away from the household in order to get the permission from inside the households. The *Nayaadi* community in the Kerala atmosphere was in abundance in Malabar and they carried the tradition of accepting alms from the rich and well-to-do households. The beggars of this variety receives the charities from the houses and bless the members of their family with special types of prayers which they offer after the acceptance of the charities from the family. So the beggars with the “whining voices” symbolise not only the ordinary baggage but it included these special category of Beggars from the *nayaadi* groups.

The poem mostly speak about the different characters acquaintances visitors and strangers which the narrator encounter in the atmosphere of Malabar and Kamala Das presents the intersection of the society in front of the readers not only to express her own psyche and experiences but also to expose the social set up in Malabar and also to unveil the communal harmony and coexistence existing in the region of Malabar. The next character coming to the ancestral home of the narrator in the poem is a group which is considered to be a lower caste called the *kurava* community. This community from the tribal backgrounds are experts in fortune telling through different methods adopted by them from their centuries' old tradition. The ‘... men who come from hills/With parrots in a cage and fortune-cards...’ tell the fortunes of the household members and they find their sustenance and livelihood from the income they received from the households in the form of contribution and alms. The tribal communities visit the houses in groups or as family members in which the male members of the family or community will be

experts in predicting the future of the members in the mainstream society with the cards and parrots. The parrot will be picking up from the number of cards displayed in front of it and the men will be explaining the interpretation hidden inside the picture which is inscribed in the cards. While the men find themselves as fortune-tellers using cards the *kurava* women are experts in reading future analysing the palms of the members in the families. The poet finds the beggars and fortune tellers- ‘...All stained with time’ because they are following the century old tradition which was handed over from one generation to another as a means of seeking livelihood and sustenance.

The next group of the visitors at noon time include the bangle sellers who carry bangles in different colours along with the dust of the roads. This group of visitors who engage in bangle selling in the Malabar region is from a specific caste called the Chettiar. Normally the female members of this caste will be engaged in bangle selling and they are called *Chettichi* in the Malabar regions. They carried different types of bangles with multi coloured varieties on their heads and they invited the attention of the families in the houses especially the girl members of the family with their sharp shrill and strange voice. As each caste who is engaged in their different professions invite the attention of the members in the family's they also will be having different types of voices and styles to invite the attention for their professional life. So the poet explains and analyses the difference in the voices of the visitors who come at the noon time and she expresses the impression of these visitors on her life in the childhood times.

The second part of the poem shifts from the explanation of visitors of the houses towards the strangers who are passing by the house of the narrator. As a girl child and the poet was having the experience from inside the house. So she was only able to see and experience the visitors who

come to their houses as beggars and fortune tellers. The world outside the house and the strangers passing through the streets was experienced through the mind-sets thoughts and emotions of the strangers who are passing by the house. She witnessed the strangers who are eager to quench their thirst from the well in front of her house but they are not able to come inside the compound wall because of the social constraints existed in the Malabar region because of the class and caste distinctions. As a girl child the poet witnessed many types of strangers with many mind-sets and many physical and psychological features and it was the noon time were many visited her house.

Even from the biography of the poet it is evident that Kamala Das belonged to the higher caste Hindu community and many depended on their houses for their livelihood and sustenance. She could enjoy all these acquaintances from inside her house and exposure to the outside world was restricted because of the social atmosphere in the Kerala society of the time. The outside world was exposed only after her marriage when she was forced to stay in the urban atmosphere. But the urban atmosphere was stranger for her and she lost all this acquaintances and the presence of visitors and strangers in her rural life. The transition from a girl child to a full grown woman has created an exposure to her life but with little freedom to enjoy beauty and affairs of the rural areas.

So the main focus of the poem is the loss and alienation which the poet experience because of the transition from the rural girl to an urban women. She is very much worried about the loss in this transition as she expresses her anxiety in the line ' To be here, far away, is torture'. Though she finds the loss of many cultural artefacts and experiences in the urban side the women in the Malabar were not experiencing the luxuries and comforts which the poet experienced in her

childhood. Even the evolution of Kamala Das was having many problems because of the patriarchal society and the social norms which ruled the social psyche of the region. The region of Malabar was dominated by the dominant caste attitudes and discrimination. The caste discrimination, patriarchy and the colonial oppression which was at its peak in Malabar victimised the people of Malabar in many ways. Kamala Das was not subjected to caste discrimination as she was belonging to a privileged caste in Malabar but she was a victim of religious fundamentalism and patriarchy. Even from the childhood she was witnessing many visitors like bangle sellers and fortune-tellers coming to her houses but they were not allowed to enter the houses and they were performing their activities outside the houses and the family members supported their livelihood with contributions and alms.

So the transition of the Malabar woman as portrayed in the poem by Kamala Das is an amalgamation of many experiences through the interaction of many communities, castes and religions which existed in Malabar as people lived in Malabar with congruence and religious hospitality. Though the pangs of caste system diminished from the mainstream of Malabar politics and culture the horrors of religious fundamentalism and patriarchy are still showing its presence through multifaceted and manifestations to subjugate the women community.

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