

SEMESTER 2

ENGH-H-CC-T-3

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KAMALA DAS: AN INTRODUCTION

SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Explain: 'In him . . . the hungry haste /Of rivers, in me . . . the oceans' tireless /Waiting'.

Though the speaker wears a shirt and cuts her hair short to dismantle the discourse of conventional gender practice, she at times finds it difficult to get rid of the reductive norms of patriarchal socialization. While 'the hungry haste/Of rivers' refers to the masculine cultural space of aggression and hyper-activity, the phrase 'oceans' tireless /Waiting' defines the woman as a passive recipient. Devoid of agency, the speaker thus fails to liberate the act of waiting from its traditional connotation of non-action. The use of the phrase 'oceans' tireless /Waiting' also justifies the foregrounding of patience and tolerance as feminine qualities in a conservative Indian society based on the principle of gender discrimination.

2. Why does the speaker introduce the idea of schizophrenia in the poem?

In conservative patriarchal societies women are not only represented as vulnerable to emotional excess, but also as persons essentially susceptible to schizophrenia, a mental illness in which one's thoughts and feelings are not based on what is really taking place around him/her. It is the patriarchal order that, with all its internal contradictions, forces the women to confront the gulf between appearance and reality, between the normative gender roles and the false promise to ensure happy lives for them. Ironically enough, the patriarchal order creates the material context for the possibility of such mental illness and yet tries to project it as symptomatic of

a fundamental feminine instability that has nothing to do with unequal gender relations and their stifling impact on women. This explains why the women, confined to object-positions, shrink ‘pitifully’ and ‘cry embarrassingly loud’ but apparently find no escape from the dilemma.

3. Why does the speaker put on a shirt and her brother’s trousers?

This is a desperate attempt of the speaker to destabilize the gender stereotypes prevalent in the society. The speaker, while adopting the dress of her brother, seeks to appropriate the masculine role in order to transcend the preconstructed conditions of male oppression. Since male clothing is culturally associated with agency and self-assertion, the speaker is encouraged to pick up male clothing, thereby inverting the female role and also inverting, in metaphoric terms, the privileged system that lends primacy to men. This political act of imagining a crossover to another condition of identity is a necessity for the speaker because when she is forced to share a bed with a stranger, she realizes that she belongs to a cultural domain of restricted possibilities.

4. How does the speaker in the poem define ‘womanliness’?

‘Womanliness’, for the speaker, implies the codes of behavior for girls and wives already defined in a patriarchal society. That is why she refers to the traditional roles of women as embroiderers, cooks and homemakers (‘quarreller with servants’) and to the compulsion of getting dressed ‘in sarees’. A prohibitive discourse is carefully built up with the purpose of restricting the movement of women in the public space and thus reinforcing the separate sphere theory: ‘Don’t sit/On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows’. Disseminating such normative values and discriminatory social roles, every gender system gives the false impression that dominant gender categories of masculinity and femininity are unalterable.

(Please go through a Kamala Das Interview attached herewith)