

Review

The real feminists in Indian English writing: Kamala Das and Imtiaz Dharker

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Accepted 8 August, 2013

Kamala Das belongs to the first generation of modern English poets who evolved a new poetics for themselves and made a new start both in theme and technique around the 1960s. The first phase of Indo-Anglican poetry ended in the 1950s. To the poets of this period the spirit of modernism was almost alien. Their main preoccupation was the spirit of nationalism and the war of independence, partition of country. It was only in the sixties that things began to take a new dimension where a new generation of young poets took control of the Indo-Anglican poetic realm. Kamala Das is one of the most powerful voices of this post-colonial era. In Kamala Das's poetry we find the best expression of feminine sensibility, its suppression in a male dominated society. So her poetry is confessional and autobiographical to a great extent, but at times she universalizes what is personal. The main themes of Dharker's poetry include home, freedom, journeys, communal conflict and gender politics. Purdah and other poems deal with the various aspects of a Muslim woman's life where she experiences injustice, oppression and violence engineered through the culture of purdah. This mixed heritage and itinerant lifestyle is at the heart of her writing: questioning, imagistic and richly textured poems that span geographical and cultural displacement, while also interrogating received ideas about home, freedom and faith. This research paper would unfold how both above mentioned poetesses rebel against the conventional restraints of society which are meant to exploit women in this man made world. "An Introduction" and "Stone Age" are two of Kamala Das's poems where she is intensely conscious of herself as woman, and by writing about the self she challenges the accepted notions of the female and redraft general opinion of the feminine mystique."Purdah" and "Living Space" are Imtiaz Dharker's poems which show the passion of an undaunted rebel, not to retreat and not to fail. The intensity and eloquence of her life and poetic accomplishment have dumbfounded the male-chauvinists and have left her female counterparts in soaring spirits not only inside the Islamic social, cultural and religious setup but also outside it. That is why her life and poetry make a fascinating study in the crushing indictment of the suppressive prescriptions against the freedom, dignity and respectful living of women, especially in the Muslim society. Imtiaz confirms our convictions that socio-cultural and socio-religious restrictions on women have robbed them of all their potentialities, leaving them not only physically and mentally handicapped but also psychological wrecks age after age. The lived experiences of Imtiaz have been honestly expressed in her poetry with the courage of conviction.

Key words: Feminist, sexuality, rebel, patriarchy, post-colonial study.

INTRODUCTION

Women's poetry in India has a distinct landmark and tradition of its own right from the original tribal songs of its

original inhabitants; it includes: the Pali songs of Buddhist nuns of the 6th Century B. C., the Sangam poets of Tamil

like Andal and Auvaiyar, the devotional poets of the middle ages like Mirabai, Ratna Bai, Jana Bai, Aatukri Mollw and Akkamahadevi, Muddupalani, Bahinabai, Mahlaq Bai Chanda and Sanoiya Hosannamma of 17th and 18th Centuries and reached up to Kamala Das's mother Balamoni Amma (19 July 1909 – 29 September 2004). Kamala Das's poetry has her autobiography written in it. She is not just any woman or the incarnation of "essential womanhood" if at all there is one. She is an Indian poet, writing in English when Indian poetry in English is breaking free from the rhetorical and romantic tradition. Kamala's much discussed poem, "An Introduction" (1965) is a comprehensive articulation of the different individual and social components that go into the making of this sub genre. First appeared in "Summer in Calcutta" (1965) and the in "The Old Playhouse and other poems", "An Introduction" is one of the best poems ever written by Kamala Das. Here we should note that she is the inheritor of many traditions, the regional cultural traditions of Kerala and the pan-Indian tradition: and within the regional tradition she has a specifically matrilineal background provided by her caste, and a specific provincial background offered by Malabar Coast when she was born and spent her early childhood.

She bears the fruit of two poetic traditions, that of Malayalam whose roots go back into the ancient Tamil Sangam poetry and medieval folklore, and another one is Indian English poetry beginning with Henri Derozio and Toru Dutt. She herself has two poets in her family, Balamoni Amma her mother and Nalapat Narayan Menon, her maternal uncle. As a small school going child she felt tortured by the "subtle sadism" of her teachers and house maids. Kamala Das is the first Hindu woman to write honestly about sexual feelings and her bodily needs and was short listed in 1984 for the Nobel Prize in Literature; along with Marguerite Yourcenar (8 June, 1903 – 17 December, 1987), Doris Lessing (born 22 October, 1919) and Nadine she occupies a unique place among Indian English poets.

She introduced a new idiom, a genre of her own, a novel approach and an altogether new sensibility. She gathered courage through Gordimer (born 20 November, 1923). Her wistfulness to assert herself and write poetry was unique and it became an expression of revolt against deep rooted malaise prevalent in a patriarchal society.

Feminist consciousness and language found an exponent of sensuality and spirituality in Kamala Das, who unmindful of brickbats and accolades, carried on untiringly creating poems of abiding charm, enduring empathy and inconceivable audacity. She was not an exhibitionist. She represents the essential every woman, their desires and anguish, giving voice to the universally voiceless women. In this venture Kamala Das carried on her mission undaunted, inviting controversies now and then till the point of her death.

This paper would try to focus on the feminist streak in Kamala Das as well as Imtiaz Dharker who show that

whichever religion the female belongs to, sufferings and atrocities are the same. They show the women's psyche from childhood, as a wife, as lover, a voice against exploitation; each role constitutes different demands and a different perspective on the people around them. Such a poetic treatment belongs to the history of the recent years in which there has been a heightening of interest in the work and achievement of women in particular.

Imtiaz Dharker belongs to that generation of post-independence women poets who have given a convincing assurance that Indian English Poetry matches the best anywhere. Among these poets, we may include Kamla Das (born 31 March, 1934 – 31 May 2009), Melanie Silgado (1956), Sujata Bhatt (born 6 May, 1956), Eunice de Souza (1940), Mamta Kalia, Tara Patel etc. They have not only broadened the thematic concerns of Indian English Poetry but also shown how words and images – simple, suggestive and highly evocative – can recite the music of their anguish and agony, their irritations and humor, their observations and reflections with no sign of pretension. This serious and well-considered response to the observed and lived experiences is a drama of daily life here and there poeticized. Not only the technical excellence but also the pain and poignancy endured in suffocation and suppression have found a justifiable outlet in their creative instinct.

The present study includes only Purdah group of poems and "I Speak For the Devil (2001)" and her "Postcards from god (1997)" and "The Terrorist at My Table (2006)" have been deliberately kept out of purview for such is the demand of the present venture. Imtiaz Dharker regards herself as a Scottish Calvinist Muslim and her poetry is a confluence of three cultures. It reflects and depicts her deeply sensitive and keenly insightful understanding and response to these three cultures. Her sincerity in handling the issues of social, cultural and religious significance sensitizes the reader equally well. The delicacy and the tenderness that run in her silky strains awakens us to the wrongs and songs of the daily life of women under the norms, rules and sanctions laid down by the patriarchal society for power dynamics. She captures even the fleeting moments and thoughts with the rare touch of the artist who is heart and soul, mind and spirit, body and intellect, integrally and indispensably associated with all that is the fragile fabric of life. The surety Imtiaz gives and the impact she creates in so doing leaves the reader stunned.

The exquisite simplicity of her style lends to her poems an inimitable brilliant conversation, a lively and stinging comment trapping us in the enchanting romance of The 1000 Nights deconstructed as a morale-booster to feminism. Purdah has been sung and celebrated age after age in poetry, films and common parlance. With the rise of feminism and its becoming a world-wide rage, a force; purdah is seen in new light and new perspectives. We know that purdah is associated with Muslim women

only; although in parts of Indian society also, even today, purdah is observed and the tradition adhered to in the same spirit of social and cultural prescription. However, purdah has greater socio-cultural and socio-religious association for Muslim women, educated or uneducated, advanced or backward, prosperous or penurious. There is an injunction to the Prophet in "The Koran" which reads as follows:

"O Prophet, tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (When they go abroad). That will be better, that so they may be recognized and not annoyed....." – (Sur Azhab) Surah 33. Al-Ahzab, Ayah 59.

Obviously, Purdah was necessary in the beginning of Islam when the Arabian countries were torn by turmoil and social strife. Thus purdah ensured safety to women then and it also became a symbol of high status. However, today, purdah is viewed as a flagrant violation of the basic rights, freedoms and dignity of women. Purdah is treated as symbol of repression on women as it is devastatingly ruinous to the personality of women. To be covered from head to foot in the black veil is more indispensable to Muslim women. There has been and is a sporadic revolt and heated controversy in the print and electronic media against this practice to regenerate and rejuvenate female psyche. That is why its evils are viewed as outweighing its good.

Imtiaz Dharker, with her social and cultural growth and lived experiences spanning three countries- Pakistan, England and India- has shown her subtle artistry in exposing the Purdah System in her title poems, poems related to it, in all its complexes of theme and style. The symbolism inherent in purdah also finds its subtlety and simplicity in alien cultural setting.

Coming to Kamal Das, "An Introduction" is itself a polyphonic text with several of the poet's voices seeking articulation in a single verbal construct. The opening statement, "I do not know Politics" has an ambiguous tone that portrays women's marginalized position in society. Outwardly it is a confession of ignorance, but it also conceals an irony that the society does not expect a woman to deal in politics. She is never the master in politics but just a victim of it and hence her knowledge of the names who are in power has no impact on her personal life. Then she brings into account more specifically showing nationality, complexion, place of birth and the language known, an ironic filling up an *un given* form.

The "language she dreams in love" (An Introduction) <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/in-105/> again is ambiguous enough to warrant many interpretations: It could be that of imagination, woman's language, English or Malayalam and many more. She also justifies her choice of English as the medium of expression as she believes that she has the right to use it with her own

angularities and eccentricities, her human joys and longing. It is the voice of her instincts as is the lion's roar and the crow's cawing. She recalls the unconscious terrors of her childhood from trees, monsoon clouds and the rains. Speaking of adolescence her female body inscribes itself on the text and she remembers too her first encounter with masculine violence that belongs to the same frightening world of trees in the storm and the muttering of the funeral pyre. Reference to the swelling limbs, growing hairs, the pitiful weight of breasts and womb and the sad woman's body "emphasize the corporal ground of woman's experience female physicality often identified with female sexuality. It has been said that women suffer cultural scripts in their bodies and women writers are like the mythic woman warrior who went into battle scarred by the then blades which her parents literary used to write fine lines of script on her body. The women cannot change her body, so the poet changes her dress and tries to initiate men. But the voices of tradition would force her back into sarees; the saree becomes a sign of convention here. She is pushed back into her expected gender roles: wife, cook, embroiderer, quarreller with servants; the gender role also become a class role. The elders fill her world with taboos asking her to be her "parents, Amy, her friends" Kamala or her reader's Madhabikutty (her pen name in Malayalam). Every deviation from this fixed rule is looked upon as perversion or mental illness. Her humiliated self begs for real love, the nature similes of the hasty river and the waiting ocean re-emphasizes the element of instinct that drives the woman in her. The many ontological dimensions of her being – lover's darling, drinker of the city nights, one who makes love, feel shame, sinner, saint, beloved, betrayed – are tied together at the end of the poem where the poet's ego dissolves in others as soon as it is asserted.

If the poet finds the male ego, "tightly packed like the sword in its sheath" (An Introduction) <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/in-105/>, violent, arrogant and exclusive, she finds her identity to be a moment of deference before a final dissolution in others as she finds that her joys and aches are the same as those of her readers and common women.

Prof. K. R. S. Iyenger characterizes this poem as confessional. And Devindra Kohli calls it "a candid and witty piece of self-revelation." {Indian Writing in English (1983)} The poem encompasses the whole of Das's poetic journey including the obvious post-colonial agenda. It raises the key post-colonial feminist question of identity of a woman of substance who also happens to be a poet. It voices her firm refusal abandoned English as an alien tongue and, on behalf of those choosing to use this language as a poetic medium, she identifies it as a vital and inseparable component of the Indian Identity.

The poem "Stone Age" belongs to Kamala Das's third volume of poetry, "*The Old Playhouse and other Poems*" (1973). The entire poem is in the form of a monologue

from the mouth of a woman who finds neither love nor happiness in her relationship with her husband. Like other poems of Das this poem also deals with the theme of the failure of conjugal relationship. It also shows how step by step the wife develops illicit relationship in the hope of finding proper love but ultimately landed into a barren loveless land. The poem can easily be divided into two distinct parts. The first part shows the treatment that the woman persona receives from her husband. He treats her not as a human being but merely as an object for beautification placed in some corner of the house. Then she becomes a stone object – a bird or stone or a granite dove. Her husband was very indifferent towards her. Instead of love she started to beg kindness from him. The image of a fat spider settled in the mind of the wife highlights the sinister nature of man. In turn, it also shows that his love is like the web of a spider that words as a trap for its victim and helps the spider to suck up the vitality from its victim and make it lifeless. This is a process that makes her completely dependent on the wish of the man. He pays little heed to her comforts and discomforts and even disturbs the serenity of her mind with his beastly behaviour: “Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilder. Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, A granite dove.....” (The Stone Age <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-stone-age-2/>). Thus dissatisfied in married life, the woman is unconsciously drawn towards illicit relationship in search of pure and true love. This desire is so strong that it makes the pull of traditional in her ineffective; these instincts are to be kept hidden from public eyes like gutters beneath clean cities. Behind the back of her husband, she discovers her own ways of finding love. She goes to her secret rendezvous and tries to find love outside marriage. Curious neighbours peep on her activities as she comes and goes in her blue car. The repetitive use of blue colour indicates the innocent nature of her adventures. The woman’s personal efforts to find out true love almost always bring her sordid experiences of physical relationship. The man she goes to find relief from the bitter experience of marital relationship seems to be a lion to her for his fierce nature during sexual intercourse. She remembers the taste of his mouth, as well as the brutal way of his love making. Such experience of love is something different from the indifference she received from her husband. The moments of such love relationships are a kind of blinder to her. But this experience of love turns out to be of very short duration and she knows that she has to pay the price for them.

In her autobiography “My Story (1977)”, Das says “In the orbit of illicit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence.” All her quests for true love end in disasters of sexual intercourse which brings only sorrow and fatigue.

..... Ask me, everybody ask me
What he sees in me, ask me why he is called a lion,

A libertine, ask me the flavor of his
Mouth ask me why his land sways like a hooded snake
Before it, claps my pubis. Ask me why like
A great tree, felled, he slumps against my breast,
And sleeps. Ask me why life is short and love is
Shorten, still, ask me what is bliss and what its
price.....”(An Introduction)
<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/in-105/>.

In the case of Imtiaz dharker, “Purdah-I (Oxford University Press, 1989)” and “Purdah-II” need to be read with “Honour Killing”, “Prayer”, “Grace” and “Battle-line.” (<http://www.imtiazdharker.com/poems/show/9>). This group of poem is packed with vast immensities. We have a fine experience of the force of courage and the force of conviction in the landscape of Imtiaz’s poetry, though her poetic potentiality is no less strong in other poems. “Purdah-I” is a discreet protest and an eloquent criticism of the tradition of veil strictly sanctioned and imposed on Muslim women. Our attention is focused on the turning point in the life of a Muslim girl when she suddenly becomes conscious of her sexual growth; others are perhaps more conscious.

“One day they said
she was old enough to learn some shame.”
And –
“Purdah is a kind of safety.
The cloth fans out against the skin
much like the earth that falls
on coffins after they put the dead men in.”(Purdah 1989)
The conservative society, cautious and conscious, must
teach her some manners, decorum and dignity for the
woman in the purdah is –
“carefully carrying what we do not own:
between the thighs, a sense of sin.” (The Stone Age)
<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-stone-age-2/>
People around are the same; their looks are changed
with a purpose –
“But they make different angles
in the light, their eyes aslant,
a little sly”(Purdah 1, 1989 <http://www.imtiazdharker.com/poems/show/9>).

They notice her shame but purdah is a protection against undesirable, vulgar and vile looks of staring people. So Eunice de Souza regards “purdah not just as concealing garment but as state of mind.” Purdah is suppressive and deadening to the intellectual awakening and growth of a woman and it is damaging to her personality. Purdah is a symbol of alienation and isolation from the outside world. It is a wall between the woman and the world. The result is that she is devoid of the first hand experience and the enlightenment this world has to offer. There is nothing refreshing in it; it curbs and restricts the speech and full expression; it is a repression of will and choice. Her mind and memory are stuffed with impressions from other

women; their consciousness of sex and the feeling of sin associated with it grow to a stifle –

“Voices speak inside us.”

Her plight is really miserable and evokes sympathy-

“Wherever she goes, she is always

inching past herself,

as if she were a clod of earth,

and the roots as well.....” (Purdah 1, 1989

<http://www.imtiazdharker.com/poems/show/9>).

And the doors opening inward and again inward reveal her seclusion. In fact, the poem is a self-examination of the purdahnasheen and also an honest and courageous scrutiny of other people.

Imtiaz has killed many birds with no stone but the best is yet to be in her “Purdah-II” where the lioness is fiercest in her silence and kaleidoscopic depiction of the veiled Muslim women in an alien social, cultural, political and religious atmosphere. We hear the compassionate voice of the speaker but not her views. This voice forcefully expresses her serious humanistic and feminist concerns and the poetess achieves marvellous artistic success in the fulfilment of her poetic purpose.

However, another great poem, a high tragedy, deserves to be briefly discussed before this remarkably dramatic lyric. That high tragedy is “Honour Killing”, the first poem in “I speak For the Devil”. It so happened that a young woman was brutally shot dead in her lawyer’s office in Lahore in 1999. None else but her family did so. It was a poignantly moving and heart-rending scene. What was her crime? She had asked for a divorce. Instead of having the heart, or for that purpose even head, to condemn the killing at any level, it was welcomed as “honour killing”. Imtiaz Dharker’s sensitivity could not remain dumb or numb and it burst forth in her poem “Honour Killing”. Its reading makes a powerful impact and it sensitizes the reader, awakens and rouses his conscience to the urgent feminist concerns. She says:

“At last I’m taking off this coat,
this black coat of a country
that I swore for years was mine,
.....

this black veil of a faith
that made me faithless
to myself,

that tied my mouth,
gave my god a devil’s face,
and muffled my own voice.

<http://www.imtiazdharker.com/poems>

What is left in after the easy cage of bone is squeezed and what is left out? The closing of the poem reveals greater dimensions of tragedy:

“Let’s see

what I am out here,
making, crafting,
plotting
at my new geography.”

The poetess understands the gravity of the situation and strongly feels that women must voice their conscience and protest against such deadening discriminations and devastating sanctions. Initially the price may be high and the tragedy too deep for tears but it is earnestly desired for the freedom and happiness of the future generations of women suffocating and rotting in such an environment. Of course, this world of dark rationality has not been the same since then. Radical sensations and thinking have set in and the emboldened spirit has started showing itself even within those confines and with considerable success. Not riddance but reformation is in sight.

“Purdah-II” is more elaborate, more dramatic and more eloquent in voicing the imminent concerns of lasting significance. It is a poem about many women and all merge into one. The movement of the poem reminds us of T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”. All these women in the poem merge into one woman; they all serve the same servitude – physical, psychological, social and cultural. Those who try to break cover with the hope and dream of a free new world face uncertainty and suffer excommunication. So the poem is an undaunted criticism of the way the society works against the freedom, dignity, will and choice of women even in alien land, here England. The tenet of the Islamic faith, “Allah-u-Akbar”, comes as a reassurance and a comfort even there. The early morning call comes and the mind throws black shadows on the marble. The speaker reveals how Muslim women offer namaaz in a strange land. A group of twenty women hears the mechanical recitation from the hustling pages of the holy Koran without understanding a word, its meaning or sense. This is the shallowness of the traditional education with no light of knowledge. These words are nudged into the head as a pure rhythm on the tongue. They rock their bodies to this rhythm and this gives to them a sense of belonging. The 15- year old, new Hajji, who had cheeks pink with knowledge and startling blue eyes, throws a flower slyly on the book before a girl. It was the offering of the same hand with which he had prayed at Mecca. Imtiaz observes the sanctity of prayer in this sanctity of love. The impact of this incident was so powerful that it brought about a great physical and psychological change in the girl and she was unmindful of the punishment on the Doom’s Day.

“you were scorched
long before the judgement,
by the blaze.
Your breasts, still tiny, grew an inch.”

This was a turning point in her life and her dreams were colored with the brightest shades. A girl from Brighton,

Evelyn, noticed this blooming change in her –“I see you quite different in head.” This results in her traditional marriage. All these girls are fated to live and die with no will or choice of their own.

They are “unwilling virgins” who had been taught to bind –

“their brightness tightly round,
whatever they might wear,
in the purdah of the mind.”

This veil is not only a concealing garment but a purdah of the mind. And – “They have all been sold and bought.” Men who appeared in their life earlier or men about whom they dreamed are thing of the past, a matter of history. These girls feel a sense of pride in them and surrendered gladly to each other’s passionate delights –

“Night after virtuous night,
You performed for them,
They warmed your bed.”

Faith alone makes up for the years of loss. They made many sacrificial ceremonies to save the man and the child and what tense and dreadful moments those were looking to and waiting for the justice of God.

“ God was justice,
Justice could be dread.”

How ironical it is that these women have to observe Purdah from God even!

The mood of the speaker is calm and poised throughout and the voice evokes compassion for the sorry mess in the life of these girls and women. The poetess awakens us to the degrading and dehumanizing effect of this social, cultural and religious sanction. The speaker is well-acquainted with many of such women – their past and their present. She has a round of daily meetings with them and –

“I can see behind their veils.”

She can even recognize the region to which they belong before they speak. Some of these women dare and break cover, these ghosts of the girls. The speaker wants to share the experiences of these females who have been reduced to mere ghosts in such inhuman conditions.

“ Tell me
what you did when the new moon
sliced you out of purdah,
your body shimmering through the lies.”

The speaker tells us about two girls, the swan-necked and tragic-eyed, Saleema and Naseem. Saleema had learnt from the films that the heroine was always pure and untouched. She surrendered herself to the passion of the mad old artist and wondered “ at her own strange

wickedness.” Still there is worse in store. She gains age after losing her youth and womanhood in the continuing process of being bought and sold, annual pregnancies and marrying again. Then a revolt? Again she receives a sign of life behind the veil, finds another man and becomes another wife, begging approval from the rest. She is badly bowed under the burden of such a life.

Naseem’s elopement brought shame and disgrace to the family. She was remembered among the dead at Moharram. Her encounter with the English boy brought to her a promise of freedom. Still these women behind the veil are always on their knees. Social, cultural and religious sanction and prescription this purdah is for the women in male-chauvinistic Muslim society. And how devastating it is to the female personality and psyche!

Conclusion

Indian women writing poetry is not a new phenomenon in literature. It is quite old. Eunice de Souza tells us: “Women have been writing poetry in India since about 1000 B.C. on religious and secular themes, and it is among these rather more distant ancestors that contemporary women writers are likely to find congenial voices and styles.” Eunice de Souza goes on to trace their great verse accomplishment till today. The emotion and passion and the gusto of their expression abundantly reveal what poetic power and poetic gift are in these instruments of the harmonies of nature. More abundant and fulfilling is the promise of fast increasing number of the buds and flowers and twigs arranged, displayed and placed in all their spontaneity in the bouquets of female poetic artistry and accomplishment today. Female voice is divinely gifted with harmony and musicality if sung in creativity, not otherwise. So the orchestra of female voices is presented best with all its magic and melody when the male sensibilities are well-attuned to it. May be the modesty of male –chauvinism forbids the acknowledgement of their own past monopolistic gains and the present sense of their loss! Imtiaz obviously and rightly has a proud claim to be among them. Kamla Das is one of the most significant Indian poets writing in English today; her poetry is all about herself, about her intensely felt desire for love, for emotional involvement and her failure to achieve such a relationship. Hence knowledge of her life and personality is essential for an understanding of her poetry. Kamla Das has been called a poet in the confessional mode. The confessional poet deals in their poetry with personal emotional experiences which are generally taboo. There is ruthless self-analysis and tone of utter sincerity. The facts are not always true, but there is no deviation at all from emotional truth. What a confessional poet gives us is the “psychological equivalent” that we always get in the poetry of Kamla Das; confessional poetry is a struggle to relate the private experience with the other world as it is. Such a struggle is

in evidence in the poems of Kamla Das from a very early stage. In "An Introduction", she struggles to keep her identity against "The Categorizers" who ask to "fit in". Having refused to choose a name and a role she feels it necessary to define her identity.

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