

Kamala Das: Embodiment of Self Identity

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Abstract

One of the reasons that Indian women in such a large number have taken up their pen is because it has allowed them to create their own world. It has allowed them to set the conditions of existence free from the direct interference of men. Many women have taken to writing poetry because they can explore a wide range of experiences of the world and can search their inner self. Therefore, poetry written by women has occupied such a significant place in Indian literature. One most important Indian women poet who has ruled the literary field for decades is Kamala Das. The present paper is an attempt to explore various facets of the poetry of Kamala Das a poet.

Keywords: femininity, confessional, patriarchal, masculine, loneliness, autobiographical

Kamala Das is a confessional poet. Frank in attitude, bold in expression and controversial in life and literature Kamala Das represents a unique phenomenon in Indian literature. As a poet Kamala Das earns for herself a very good status among the women poets of the 20th century. She wrote poetry as only a woman can write. She celebrated femininity in all its forms. Her celebration of a woman's body has not been taken kindly by the conservative circles yet she has succeeded in breaking down the existing social power structures and has created a place for herself in the world of masculine hierarchies. She has dared to alter the age-old existing marginalised position of females and has made the patriarchal world accept the rightful role and position of women as a significant part of the society. Her poetry is personal in nature, autobiographical in expression, subjective in style and introspective in diction. Kamala Das's poetry is characterized by extreme sincerity and integrity. She speaks out of her love longings, frustration and disillusionment with a disarming frankness. It seems that she writes for therapeutic purposes. Her writings reflect the restlessness as a sensitive woman moving in the male dominated society and in them, she appears as a champion of women's cause. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* wrote, 'Women do not set themselves as a subject and hence have erected to virile myth in which their projects are reflected; they had no religion or poetry of their own: they still dream through the dreams of men'. Kamala Das's

life and poetic work demystify the myth of the female and generate a new role for the women in society.

Kamala Das who still looms large over the poetic horizon of not only India but all across the globe hails from the southern part of India, the Malabar coast in Kerala. She was born on 31st March 1934 to Nayar father and Nalapat mother. She received her education for the most part at home. As her autobiography tells us Kamala Das whose maiden name was Madhavikutty first attended a European school in Calcutta, then the elementary school at Punnayurkulam and then a boarding School run by Roman Catholic nuns. Here she got ill and was removed to Calcutta where private tutors were engaged to teach her fine arts. At the age of 15, Kamala was married to Mr. Das, an official in the Reserve Bank of India, Bombay where her life became miserable in the company of her nonchalant, lustful husband. Her husband had no soothing words for her, no time to spare for her and was ever busy sorting out his files and affixing his signature on them. As a traditional wife, Kamala was expected to discharge her domestic duties well and to look to the needs and comforts of her husband. This eroded her own distinct personality and dwarfed her forever, as she makes clear in the poem...

..... You called me wife

I was taught to break saccharine into your tea
 To offer at the right moment the vitamins.

Covering beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic clove and became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your questions I mumbled incoherent replies.

(The Old Playhouse)

But this iconic woman poet continued to live with her husband and looked after her three sons.

Kamala Das is a self-conscious poet and does not pretend ignorance about the unique position as a feminist mouthpiece. Thematic concerns in her poetry range from the sad plight of women in society, the harrowing situations or feminine experiences to a longing for freedom of the inner self through experiencing consummate love in interpersonal relationships. She culminates her poetic

journey with a note of a forced reconciliation, a realization of the pathetic nature of human situation. Many of her poems appear to be rebellious in form.

'I don't know politics, but I know
the names of those in power,
and can repeat them like days of week,
or names of months'
(An Introduction, Summer in Calcutta)

Her poems have their own purpose of ventilating the painful manner in which the politics of men and women interpersonal relationships are harrowing and dressed in her introspective moments. Even in creating her own language Kamala Das surpasses all the possible linguistic conventions. She is guided mainly by her impulse and instinct for precise and harmonious words. She is fully aware of the value of words which subtly find the shades of meaning. The manner in which she substantiates her argument has the poetic delicacy coupled with the stubbornness, expressing her angst and rebellious attitude towards patriarchal society.

'Why not let me speak in
Any language I like?
The language I speak
Becomes mine, it's distortions,
it's queernesses,
All mine, mine alone
It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps
but it is honest,
It is human as I am human, don't
You see? And it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions it
Is human speech.'
(An Introduction)

The conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male oriented society emerges as a major theme in her poetry. The poetess is quite alive to her femininity, asserts it and celebrates it in one poem after another. Her poetry mirrors her life in all its nakedness, the often experienced horrors and the rear joys of love.

Kamala Das's poetry has a strong note of subjectivism. She has been called a poet in the confessional mode. She deals in her poetry with personal emotional experiences which are generally taboo. Her poetry is a struggle to narrate the private experience to the outer world. As a confessional poet she does not accept the restrictions of old values and traditions of the society on herself. She dares to speak her heart. Though she shows no signs of insanity or madness in her verse, she symbolises all the

essential features of a true confessional poet.

There is too much of anguish and suffering in the verse of Kamala Das. The adverse circumstances have rendered her vision tragic and melancholic. Her tale is about the upbringing by careless parents, her marriage with an egoistic and vainglorious man, her disappointment in love and her illicit love affairs with other men in order to remove her boredom and anxiety. Added to this, she is a very sensitive and unconventional woman who is not prepared to be dictated in terms. This dissatisfaction in marriage and life sharpened her consciousness and she possibly decided to air out her grievances through the poetic medium because many inflatable things can be said in this medium without encouraging the wrath of powerful persons.

Perhaps some womb in that
Darker world shall convulse,
when I finally enter,
A legitimate entrant, marked by discontent
(Gino, The Old Playhouse and Other Poems)

A great confessional poet Kamala Das has achieved impersonality in another way. From the personal and the particular she has raised to the general and the universal. She has transformed her intense personal experience into a general truth. Her own predicament and her own suffering becomes symbolic of human predicament and human suffering. Though confessional she is universal.

Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man
(The Conflagration)

A peep into Kamala Das's poetic work shows that love, sex, marriage and companionship were important subjects of expression to her. She is basically a poet of love and pain and her verses have a pervasive sense of hurt throughout. While writing she can never persuade herself to forget that she is a woman who craves for love, companionship and understanding. Her search for love and kindness ends up in a barren wasteland, where there is neither life nor hope. She spends her life in agony and frustrations repenting and weeping most of the time.

'Fond husband, ancient settler in the mind
Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment.
Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, a
graniteDove...'
(The Stone Age)

The very first glance at Kamala Das's poetic verses makes the readers understand this fact that she feels crazy,

hungry and unhappy, in the absence of true love in her life. She remained all through her life searching for love and understanding which she could not get.

!...Who can
 Help us who have lived so long,
 And have failed in love? The heart,
 An empty cistern waiting
 Through long hours, fills itself
 With a coiling staked of silence...
 I am a freak (The Freaks)

Kamala Das's poetic writings can be segregated into two phases. In the first phase her obsessive concern with physical love is quite prominent; in the second, her drift towards ideal love can be discerned. Earlier she felt that the lovers do not outgrow their egos which stand as hurdles preventing their merger. Later on in search of an ideal love she discovered that the lovers transgress the boundaries of their egos. She holds such an exemplary relation in the love between Radha and Krishna. She summarises herself as Radha who goes in search of Krishna, the ideal lover. Kamla's earlier poems are rebellious and full of love and pain. But with the span of time, she realised the futility of her search. She turned to the mystical world of Krishna and Vrindavan to see lasting love and fulfilment. She imagined herself as Radha and found comfort in the arms of imaginary Krishna.

Everything in me is melting,
 even the hardness at core
 O, Krishna, I am melting, melting, melting
 Nothing remains but
 You.....
 (Radha)

By drowning herself in the mystical world she experienced absolute liberty from the rigid social code and the constraints of superego in the presence of Krishna.

At sunset, on the river bank, Krishna
 Loved her for the last time and left...
 That night in her husband's arms,
 Radha felt
 So dead that he asked, what is wrong
 Do you mind my kisses, love?
 And she said,
 No, not at all, but thought, what is
 It to the corpse if the maggots nip?
 (Maggots)

Krishna has a therapeutic role to play in her life. Her thoughts about Him give her relief from the asphyxiating

male chauvinism. The mystical blend in her poetry signifies the manifestation of existentialism.

A close glance at Kamala Das's poems show that love, sex, marriage and companionship were important subjects to her. Her poetic fabric is knit with love, pain, hurt, humiliation and the lazy animal hungers of flesh. When she pens down the verses she goes diving deep into her own self, unravelling mysteries which were never known to Indian women, or maybe none dared to unravel them in the past in such a way, in such an orthodox, custom ridden, conservative society. She wrote poetry for her own self-discovery and expressing different layers of hypocrisy of the society.

Kamala Das speaks about her heart on her own premises. She redefines herself and liberates herself both as a woman and a poet. She struggles to cope with her problems and dilemmas. She does not attempt to intellectualize, nor does she attempt to spiritualise. She makes a discovery of human existence and narrates her experiences vividly and passionately. She rejects masks and roles and refuses to accept the limitations of biology. In doing so unknowingly she speaks the heart of every woman all across the globe who do not find any outlet to express themselves in this patriarchal world. Suppressing their feelings these women live a pseudo life wrapped in lies and traditional bindings of the conservative society.

O sea, I am fed up
 I want to be simple
 I want to be loved
 And
 If love is not to be had,
 I want to be dead...
 (The Suicide)

In a very subtle manner Kamala Das becomes the embodiment of self-identity, a representative of female consciousness and psyche mingled with self-attainment and self-actualization.

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