

POETRY OF KAMALA DAS: A REFLECTION OF NEW INDIAN WOMEN

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Abstract:

Kamala Das is the foremost woman poet of Indian English. She appeared at a time when English poetry by Indian woman had moved on from colonial and nationalist themes to personal experiences. The tone of her poetry is distinctively feminine. Kamala Das writes about woman who suffers in the society. Kamala Das is pre-eminently a poet of love, sex and lust, pain, nervousness, melancholy and frustration. Stylistically she develops to communicate the themes in the linguistic discourse of the women to liberate herself from the shackles of flimsy romance and slavery to man.

Keywords: Foremost, colonial, feminine, flimsy romance

The emergence of a large number of women poets is a significant feature of post – independence poetry. The women poets started to communicate a powerful female sensibility which does not find expression in their male counterparts. Women poets write consciously as women. Their confessional and autobiographical tone, frank, candid and bold and realistic expression of their attitude to love, sex and lust distinguish their poetry from male poets. Their themes are few in number. Suppressed desires, the frustration of living in a male dominated world, sex and of course love are the commoner ones. Contemporary situations are finding more frequent mention in their poems. Their view – point is peculiarly feminine.

Kamala Das is the foremost woman poet of Indian English. She appeared at a time when English poetry by Indian woman had moved on from colonial and nationalist themes to personal experiences. Kamala Das's poetic output covers a wide panorama of themes, more realized settings and deeper feeling, intensity of emotion and speech, rich and full complexity of life. In a criss-cross examination, her touchy and titillating

feelings of loneliness and despair seem to be larger than life. Even in this man made social construct, she voices her feminine quest openly. She is critically considered to be a subjective poet and her poems are 'products of uncontrollable emotion'. The tone of her poetry is distinctively feminine. Kamala Das writes about woman who suffers in the society. Almost all her works show her concern for social and cultural construction of gender, raising her protest against marginalization and exploitation of woman, interestingly enough she has also shown that women have no separate existence free from men. Kamala Das is pre-eminently a poet of love, sex and lust, pain, nervousness, melancholy and frustration. Love for her is the hunger of the flesh, it hurts and humiliates and gives only dissatisfaction. She is a confessional and autobiographical poet who writes candidly about her own experiences of frustration in love and drudgery in married life. In 'Introduction' one of her best poems in Summer in Calcutta, she writes about her first sexual encounter with man:

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 breast and womb crushed me.*
 (Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets)

This poem has variously been interpreted as intensely autobiographical and the poet's aesthetic manifesto. The poem is an attempt to assert the poet's individuality and feminine identity against social and cultural conformity. She wants to forget her womanliness which makes her cry. In fact, it is both psychological exploration of the self and a social assertion of one's individuality in straight forward terms. The poem begins with conversational note and ends with nervous urgency. The poet scrutinizes the linguistic differences of English used in everyday life.

In 'The Conflagration' love is burial:

*Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
 Beneath a man? (The Best of Kamala Das)*

Here is a note both of protest and resentment at the lustful exploitation of woman. She has lost her identity in the presence of the domineering male and craves for liberty. With the passage of time, her verification and sense of form became freer and looser, her style changed but did not necessarily improve. Her early poems seem to be an autobiographical odyssey of her self-dealing with marriage, love life, desire for intimacy, her guilt and fame. Her poems analytically discuss the eternal and universal themes and protect the new idiomatic devices. Stylistically she develops to communicate the themes in the linguistic discourse of the women to liberate herself from the shackles of flimsy romance and slavery to man.

Kamala Das has carved out a prominent place for her in the area of both prose and verse. In the society to which Kamala Das belongs it was impossible for a woman to rebel against the masculine yoke, against a male's sense of superiority because the male almost occupied the position of a God. Das felt that woman has always belonged to the deprived categories of humans. This kind of gender arrangement must have disturbed her like anything. She realized that woman is not a slave and she has every right to seek freedom. The result was her poetry where she successfully threw to winds the traditional Indian notion of mortality. She found pleasure in constantly moving away from the accepted norms of the society. The vacillation between the traditionally defined role model and her personal yearning to secure an undefined independent role for herself springs an apparent inconsistency.

In the feministic perspective, it seems that she feels pride of her conquest and ability to make men love her. She is being driven for all encompassing love in the game of sexual triumph with its trophies. In the psychoanalytical framework, her poems seem to be an attempt at drawing the thin line that demarcates fulfillment and unfulfilment in love. 'The Dance of Eunuchs' is a poem that successfully delineates the contrast between the superficial joy and the inner depravity. The eunuchs become the objective correlative of

suppressed desires. Their dance appears to be happiness incarnate. It voices her authentic feelings of agony, albeit in an oblique manner.

*"... Wide skirts going round and round cymbals
 Richly clashing and anklets Jingling, Jingling
 Jingling..." (The Best of Kamala Das)*

The masculinity can be rejected and nullified by the woman when she is happily ready to participate in the mirth and merriment of life. Kamala Das discovers this kind of truth in the naturalist fervor and utters:

*"How
 Brief the term of my
 Devotion, how brief
 Your reign when I with
 Glass in hand, drink, drink
 And drink again this*

Juice of April suns". (The Best of Kamala Das)

Her personal life is solely responsible for her head long plunge into the uncharted sea of sexuality. She finds that adultery is very common sight in city life. Her husband does not create any hurdle regarding free-love-sex life.

One of the important poems where Kamala Das draws our attention to the suffering and humiliation which woman are made to experience is "Nani". This is the inevitable fact of a servant maid. Maids become pregnant even before they get a chance to get married and the choice left before them is to hang themselves or to consume poison and thereby end their lives. It is a horrible picture that Kamala Das gives when she juxtaposes both the tragic and the comic. The focus of the poem is a pregnant housemaid hanging herself, an act to which she was driven by shame and moral austerity in which she lived. The spectacle of Nani hanging from a rope is heart rending which raises unanswerable question:

*Nani, the pregnant maid, hanged herself
 In the privy one day. For three long hours
 Until the police came, she was hanging there
 A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew
 Turning her gently on the rope; (The Best Of
 Kamala Das)*

The image of the clumsy puppet performing a comic dance is noted for its vividness and also for its suggestiveness. Nani, as is made evident by the poet, has been a puppet in the hands of fate and the

real culprit who has subjected her to such humiliation is of course the society and also its moral codes. She hangs from a rope as a helpless victim to the designs of an “unknown citizen” and the effect produced to the eyes of children is comic. The grandmother in the poem, after a year or two parries the unpleasant question when the speaker asks her whether she remembers Nani. She also can only be part of a society which has its own ways and it is not an unexpected response that the speaker receives from her, that is why the speaker has a readymade answer to why she reacts in that way.

Each truth

Ends thus with a query. It is designed

Deafness that turns mortality into

Immortality, the definite into

The soft indefinite. (The Best Of Kamala Das)

As far as the speaker is concerned, the experience appears to have been one of initiation. She moves from a world of innocence to a narrow, conservative way of life which prefers to suppress what is unpleasant and unexpressable.

To sum up, courage and honesty are the features that mark the poetry of Kamala Das. She takes a rather independent view of things and never wants to idealize woman. Sometimes her women celebrate love outside marriage, and some other

times they suffer for the simple reason that they are married. Most of the time woman in her poems challenge the established norms of the society and assert themselves. But in some of her poems men are more than conspicuous and inevitable partners of women. She advocates freedom for women on the one hand and chooses to laugh at those who claim themselves to be feminist on the other. On the whole the picture of women that emerges from her poems is not a monolithic one. Her attitude can certainly be described as one of ambivalence.

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