

GENDER & SOCIETY

KAMALA DAS

Poems of a woman – Poems for the women

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Abstract:

Kamala Das, identified as a writer in the genre of confessional poetry, is ranked with rebellion poetesses like Sylvia Plath & Judith Wright. She tried to explore the many roles Indian woman has to play knowingly and subconsciously, sometimes becoming just a shadow of her man throughout the life.

Keywords: Gender justice, Equality, Rebellion, Suffering, Orthodoxy.

Kamala Das has been identified as a writer in the genre of confessional poetry, ranked with rebellion poetesses like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Rosemary Sullivan, Judith Wright and others. She is the first Indian woman poet who wrote against the established patriarchy.

Some of the poems simply portray the everyday life as it is. Outwardly the poem seems like a simple narration. On closer examination one can easily see a silent protest. The rebellion element becomes very much salient. In her poem “Old Playhouse” Kamala Das reflects the anguish of an Indian wife:

You called me wife

*I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
 To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
 Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
 Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your
 Questions I mumbled incoherent replies*

(“Old Playhouse”)

The poem reflects the deep anguish of a young woman (or rather young girl!) who was a loving child at her maternal home just a few days back.

As a nation we are most modern yet we are also very orthodox. In spite of being a leading Information Technology Nation, we still believe in the good and the bad omen for small things in life. We have had a woman Prime Minister long before England, yet we have not been able to completely abolish bride burning even in the 21st century!

O.J. Thomas has explained this scenario beautifully:

“..... The main areas where Indian women concentrated their activity was to bring in sanity to customs and traditions like ‘Sati’ by which women were burnt to death on the pyre of their husbands.....”

Kamala Das is generally seen in the fore-front of such writers who fought for the rights of woman.”¹

Sometimes the poems speak about her love for life. Sometimes they indicate her feeling of revulsion, her irony and her disenchantment and her rebellious intent against patriarchy. In the poem “Next to Indira Gandhi” she puts a number of questions to her father:

Father, I ask you now without fear

Did you want me

Did you ever want a daughter

Did I disappoint you much

With my skin as dark as yours

You chose my clothes

My tutors, my hobbies, my friends,

*And at fifteen with my first saree you picked
 me a husband.*

(Next to Indira Gandhi)

The poem beautifully speaks about the control of men over her life. Her father might have done all this with his extreme love for his daughter. Yet the final manifestation is the loss of identity of the young girl. By the act of marriage, the father has ceremoniously passed on the control of her daughter to her husband. Did anyone ask the young girl what she desired? The line, “With my first Saree you picked me a husband” speaks about the loss of childhood just by a single act of her father’s decision to get her married.

It is not that she always wrote about pathos. She touched almost all aspects of life. She wrote about intense passion also:

When he

And I were one, we were neither

Male nor female. There were no more

Words left, all words lay imprisoned...

(“Convicts”)

Feminism finds its reflection in writing of Kamala Das. Many of the poems of Kamala Das reflect the agony of womanhood. Her use of the words like, ‘menstrual blood’ or ‘sweat between the

breasts' must have shocked the men. The words or the phrases may appear a little harsh, yet they are part of every woman's life. Kamala Das was trying to bring womanhood out of the sphere of shame into the world of recognition. This was the Indian version of the women's liberation. Her poetry reflects the desire of the women to be seen respected and recognized. A. N. Dwivedi writes:

*As a poet of sharp feminine sensibility, Kamala Das gives vent to the hopes, fears and desires of womankind. She has been the champion of woman's cause in all her writings, and there is no point I challenging this statement which amounts to an altruism.*²

Kamala Das has broken the shackles of inhibitions in her poems. From outside the poem may seem to be a simple celebration of a particular aspect of life, but reading between the lines one can see what Kamala Das wants to convey. She uses many metaphors like sea, sun, darkness etc. To communicate Kamala Das chooses a bold language, sometimes to the discomfort of the traditionalists. Ramesh Kumar Gupta writes:

*The poem 'Sumer in Calcutta' celebrates the poetess's mirthful share in life, but when read between the lines, the poem records the poetess's awareness about the male-chauvinism over woman.*³

This poem if examined closely, the tone of feminism is very clear. Outwardly it seems as if the poem celebrates the togetherness. But in reality it is the pain of subjugation that is being presented. In two words 'Your reign' Kamala Das says I all. Later in the poem she says, 'I sip the Fire..' The subjugation of male hegemony over the female is complete:

*How
 Brief the term of my
 Deviation, how brief
 Your reign when I with
 Glass in hand, drink, drink
 And drink again this
 Juice, of April Suns
 The April Sun, Squeezed
 Like an orange
 My glass? I sip the
 Fire, I drink and drink
 Again, I am drunk,
 Yes, but on the gold
 Of suns
 (The Old Playhouse and Other Poems)*

A very interesting imaging is of the women being drunk of life. 'I am drunk but on the gold of suns' depict power of the new woman. This new

woman has the guts to challenge the traditional concept of marriage wherein the woman is just a show piece like the other items of the house.

Aptly titled another poem of the poetess 'Stone Age' talks of the mentality frozen in a bygone era. As is evident, some of the men in our society virtually live in a stone age with their outdated views on man-woman relationship:

*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 granite
 Dove, you build round me a shabby room,
 And stroke my pitted face absent-mindedly while
 You read. With loud talk you bruise my pre-morning
 sleep,
 You stick a finger into my dreaming eye. And
 Yet, on daydreams, strong men cast their shadows, they
 sink*

(“The Stone Age”)

Even today many of the traditional men have a mindset of ancient times. They might be using the most modern electronic gadgets yet their mind remains rooted in the medieval times.

Her poem “The Looking Glass” speaks of the symbiotic relationship between man and the woman: symbiosis

*Notice the perfection
 Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
 Shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
 Gift him all,
 Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
 Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
 The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
 Endless female hungers.*

(“The Looking Glass”)

In this semi erotic poem, Kamala Das talks about the way relationship between the man and the woman should be. The masculine attraction and the feminine charm bring in some kind of eternal desire to get lost in the ocean of fantasy. Who can deny the man's attraction for the long and flowing hair of his woman? Similarly the role played by the breasts in the erotic play is depicted by the poetess. Das has beautifully portrayed the attractive masculinity also.

Having dreamt about such a relationship all her life, she is also afraid of losing a good friend or a lover:

*Getting a man to love you is easy
 Only be honest about your wants as
 Woman. Stand nude before the glass with him
 So that he sees himself the stronger one*

And believes it so, and you so much more
 Softer, younger, lovelier. Admit your
 Admiration. Notice the perfection
 Of his limbs,
 All the fond details that make
 Him male and your only man. Gift him all,
 Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
 Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
 The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
 Endless female hungers.

(“Looking Glass”)

There is another very powerfully written poem, ‘Nani’. Though the poem is about a maid servant, it speaks about the silent pain that Kamala Das experienced over the death of a simple woman in the unnatural circumstances. For the rich and the powerful, death of a maid servant means nothing. Again the word ‘puppet’ depicts the helplessness of the ordinary maid. K.V. Surendran writes:

*One of the important poems where Kamala Das draws our attention to the suffering and humiliation which women are made to experience is “Nani”. The focus of the poem is the pregnant maid servant hanging herself, an act to which she was driven by shame and moral austerity of the society in which she lived.*⁴

‘Nani’ could be the maid servant of any household in any city. Her socio-economic condition has not changed over the centuries. Kamala Das has tried to reflect the feelings of a young girl through this poem, “Nani”.

*Nani, the pregnant maid, hanged herself
 In the privy one day. For three long hours
 Until the polic came, she was hanging there
 A clumsy puppet, and when the wind blew
 Turning her gently on the rope.
 It seemed
 To us who were children then, that Nani
 Was doing, to delight us, a comic
 Dance.*

(Best of Kamala Das)

For an ordinary person this is just a case of suicide. But a poetess can see beyond what appears to an ordinary person. “A clumsy puppet” indicates the

hapless victim that is ‘Nani’. A victim of the male chauvinism that punishes the woman who indulges in extramarital relationship but spares the man who is responsible for the planting of the illegitimate child in the womb of the woman.

Conclusion:

Kamala Das has given an entirely new way of looking at the womenfolk. She created a space for the women in the man’s world. Earlier woman was almost invisible in the male dominated world. Kamala Das made her visible. Bruce King says: “Das opened areas, in which previously forbidden or ignored emotions could be expressed in ways which reflect the true voice of feeling. She showed how an Indian woman poet could create a space for herself in the public world.

Indian woman owe a lot to the writers and poetesses like Kamala Das who through their writings could bring to the notice of the society the true feelings of the contemporary woman. Kamala Das’s poetry reflects the yearning of the modern women of India for equality and justice.

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