

Kamala Das: Feminine Sensibility and Personal Self in Indian English Poetry

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to picturize the feminine sensibility and personal life of Kamala Das, who is one of the most original voices in Indian English Poetry stands out for her rebellious note against traditions, taboos and patriarchal domination. Her works hold the predominant themes like difficulty of being a woman in Indian society, explores man-woman relationship and the way a man exploits a female body. Her personal experiences are presented as universal sufferings of woman in general.

Keywords: Kamala Das, Poems, Patriarchal domination, Exploitation, Feminine sensibility, Quest for freedom, Identity

Kamala Das, who is one of the most original voices in Indian English poetry, stands out for her rebellious note against traditions, taboos, and patriarchal domination. Presenting as the first poet women's sexuality in blatant manner, she naturally shocked taboo-ridden Indian society with her open expression of sexual description both in her poetry and her autobiography. Mrs. Das, who received no formal education, no pompous university, stands on her own merit and is placed on the pinnacle of reputation and distinction among Indo-English poets of today. Her scintillating verse has that irresistible force and tilting rhythm in it which captures the reader's attention immediately. The reader often feels that he is in the presence of a writer who is highly gifted and skilful largely emotional and subjective. The poetess admirably comes through the diction of William Wordsworth when he pronounced that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. "Her poetry is intensely personal but at the same time, it is the expression of universal feminine sensibilities".

Kamala Das' maiden name was Madhavi Kutti. Born on March 31, 1934 in Southern Malabar in Kerala, Kamala Das was mainly educated at home for her mother Balamani Amma and her uncle Nalapat Narayana Menon were leading poets of Kerala. Mrs. Das wrote an autobiography titled *My Story* in 1977, which created quite an uproar for its provocative stance and openness.

As a confessional poetess, *My Story* is a confessional work that defines women's prison both social and emotional. The predominant theme of *My Story* is the difficulty of being a woman in Indian society and finding love in the so-called system of arranged

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T. Saravanapriya

Kamala Das: Feminine Sensibility and Personal Self in Indian English Poetry

317

marriage. Her poetry also explores man-woman relationship and the way a man exploits a female body. As Sunita B. Nimavat puts it, “as the first bold voice of feminine sensibilities, she was a rebellious spirit with profundity and deep concern for the deprived, the poor and the exploited” (P 1). Kamala Das writes:

“Poets cannot close their shops like shop men
and return home. Their shop is their mind
and as long as they carry it with them, they
feel the pressures and the torments. A poet’s
raw material is not stone or clay, it is his/
her personality” (My Story 165).

Truly speaking, her expression of feminine sensibility can be described as her personal self. Her fight is against patriarchy that dominates and overshadows female desires and needs. Her quest for freedom and identity reflects the artistic identity. In fact, it is “the expression of ‘female experience’ which has been neglected, repressed and uncared for (P 2). She is the first poet to give it a free, un-inhabiting expression” (Nirmavat 2). Writing in Malayalam and English, she has to her credit publication of such collections of poems as 1. *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), 2. *The Descendants* (1967), 3. *The Old Play House and other Poems* (1973), 4. *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996), 5. *Tonight, this Savage Rite* (1979) in collaboration with Prithvi Nandy and 6. *Closure: Some Poems and Conversation with Suresh Kohli* (2009). As poetry is an expression of her own personal self, she has given vent to her feelings as a woman and her physical desires in her poetic realm K.R.Srinivasa Iyenger rightly remarks:

“...she treated her poetry as an attractive
protective or defiant cover to hide the nakedness
of the self, but more often than not an engine
of Catharsis, a way of agonized self-knowledge” (P 62)

At the age of 15, Kamala Das got married to Mr. Das, an officer in the Reserve Bank of India, Bombay, where her life became miserable in the company of her nonchalant, lustful husband. As he was experienced in sex with his maid servants, his contact with his wife was usually cruel and brutal. She grew revengeful towards him, and reacted in a non-traditional fashion in love-making, offering herself to any handsome or resourceful man who came across, her, and forgiving ever her rapists. Her husband had no soothing words for her, as time to spare for her and was very busy sorting out his files and affixing his signature on them. And as a traditional wife, she 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, *The Old Play House*:

“... 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”

(The Lotus of the Rose 81-82)

This is actually a strong protest against a hollow marital bond which she cannot untie. In India, where marriage and love go hand and hand, it is most unfortunate that such a sensitive woman as Kamala Das is tied to a stake where she cannot fly (to use a Shakespearean expression). “Such occurrences are not uncommon in the land of Gandhi and Nehru, turning many a woman tragic and gloomy in their attitude towards life. Kamala Das has made repeated protests against this sort of situation in her poetry” (Dwivedi 3). But the women-poet continues to live with her husband and look after her three children. When she speaks of love outside marriage, she does not really advocate for infidelity and adultery, but merely searches for a kind of man-woman relationship which should guarantee both love and security to a woman. And it is important to note that she gives a mythical framework to her search for genuine love and identifies it with the Radhakrishna myth or with the Mira Krishna relationship.

Summer in Calcutta is the first collection of Kamala Das’ poems which sets the tone of her entire poetic career. It has fifty poems mainly dealing with love, failure and frustrations of love. The poet projects sexual disgust and miserable life of women who are victims of lust but hungry for warmth and love. The title of the poem *Summer in Calcutta* does depict sensuousness that reminds us of Keats’ ‘Ode on Indolence’. There is here a temporary triumph over frustration of love due to creativity and relaxation of mind induced by the summer. ‘The Dance of Eunuchs’ is a symbolic poem that reveals emotional impotence and sterility. Dancing eunuch whirls actively but there is a disguised sense of anguish. The poet says:

“Their voices
Were harsh, their songs melancholy: they sang of
Lovers dying and of children left unborn” (P 5).

“In love” does beautifully express the emptiness of love dominated by lust and devoid of warmth. The memory to experience plagues the mind that questions ‘where is love?’. The question remains unanswered. ‘An Introduction’ is an off-referred poem of Kamala Das that

deals with human identity and also the assertion of poet's urge to express independently in male-dominated society.

Kamala Das' poetry is concerned with both the external and internal worlds, and her response to the external world in particular, despite her inner restlessness, is marked by an admirable sense of poise and perfection. While Prithvi Nandy's poem about 'Calcutta is an ambitious poem evoking a landscape at once frenzied and explosive, Mrs. Das' outer landscape, though part of the inner landscape, can still retain its objective contours. Nandy dwells on an aspect of life in Calcutta and seems to be rhetorical but Kamala Das lets the details speak for themselves before they speak for her. *The Descendants*, the second poetical volume by Kamala Das, has twenty-three poems in all. Most of her poems in this volume are further variations of her favourite theme of sexual love. The poems like "The Descendants" "The Invitation" and "Composition" deal with emotional defeat and frustration with a sense of nothingness:

"To be frank
I have failed
I feel my age and my
Uselessness" (Composition)

The poetess is actually overwhelmed by the smouldering 'secret' that 'I am so alone' and that life is a colourless design of crumbling patterns, as in the poem "A Request":

"When I die
Do not throw the meat and bones away
But pile them up
And
Let them tell
By their small
What life was worth
On this earth
What love was worth
In the end"

The 'meaninglessness' of the poet's life is sourly conveyed in the above –given passage as also in such poems as "*Shut Out That Moon*" and "*Neutral Tones*". As an honest poet of love, Kamala Das looks very frank and naïve, without the 'intellectual pride' and the domestic air of the well-known Australian poetess, Judith Wright. It should, however, be remembered that Kamala Das wrote her poetry against a more conservative and tabooed society than that of Judith Wright. She has, therefore, more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual

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T. Saravanapriya

Kamala Das: Feminine Sensibility and Personal Self in Indian English Poetry 320

liberty and identity. More often, she concentrates on sexual love and her woman-persona rises as though in a mood of revolt. The love poems of Kamala Das usually breathe an air of unconventionality and urgency. In this connection, the following lines may be evidently marked:

“Of late I have begun to feel a hunger
To take in with greed, like a forest-fire that
Consumes, and with each killing gains a wilder,
Brighter charm, all that comes my way” (Forest Fire 51)

In Kamala Das’ poetry collections, there are a number of poems that breathe an air of love, amorousness, and sexuality. But these should not lead one to believe that she has been pleading all along for promiscuity and adultery. They rather articulate her strong desire to get liberated from the clutches of a male-dominated society and pass a happy, healthy life of peace and rest. The woman-persona in her asserts, an ‘indomitable will’ and ‘the spirit of revenge’ and gives a clarion – call to the weaker sex to rise in revolt against all kinds of repression and tyranny being perpetrated on it. Kamala Das as a poetess is never tired of speaking aloud for womanhood as a whole and several of her poems should be read in this light. “In the words of M.L. Sharma, “Throughout the chequered career of her loves and lusts, it is Lord Krishna who has been her true paramour and her quest is always single-minded” (P 108). Mrs. Das yearned for love but it was denied to her what she faced was sexual exploitation and lust. What remains to be observed here is that Kamala Das in her poetry moves us deeply through “her passionate urge and drive of the rhythm” and through her” haunting images of sterility” (Souza 86).

To conclude, Kamala Das approves of love and sex through mutual consent and total involvement. She rejects all conventions and traditions set up by male-dominated society. Her personal experiences are presented as universal sufferings of woman in general.

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