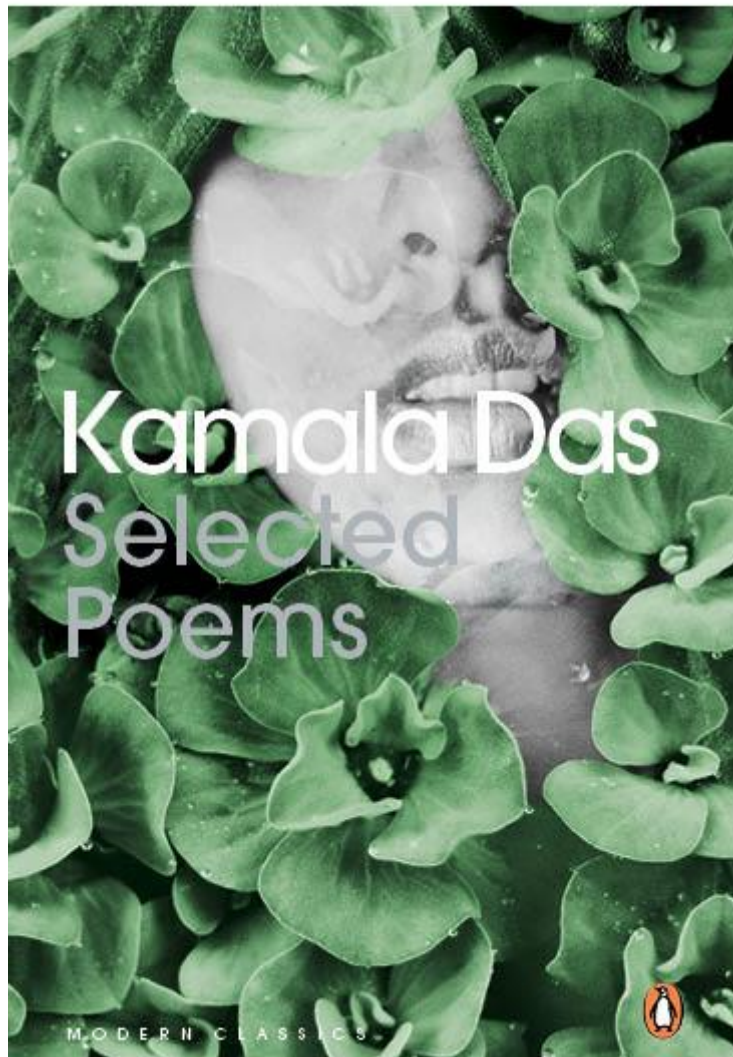


Empowerment through Language in the Tradition of the Confessional Poetry of Kamala Das

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Abstract

The empowerment of women is a multi-dimensional concept. Women's empowerment can be explained as a process where women have a larger share over resources like knowledge, information and wealth. The term 'women empowerment' has come to be associated with women's struggle for social justice and equality. More than a hundred years

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ago, the empowerment revolution was led by the suffragettes when women got the right to vote. This revolution was led by brave women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Emmeline Pankhurst and Susan B. Antony. Then came the second revolution which was led by Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem who wanted women to be given a fundamental role in decision making. During the twentieth century, many Indian women poets have tried to voice their opinions through their writings. Some of these poets have been Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das. This paper aims to explore the various aspects of Confessional poetry which I consider, as a way of realizing the empowerment of women with special reference to Kamala Das' poetical works.

Key words: Women's empowerment, confessional poetry, sexuality, Kamala Das.

Introduction

Kamala Das was born at Punnayarkulam and was married at the age of fifteen. Her dissatisfaction with her marital life made her write poems filled deeply with pain and anguish. Her husband was a gay and was thirty-years old when she was merely fifteen. However, as a wife she was not someone who suffered throughout, and she was indeed a very lively woman. She took to writing at an early age after being influenced by her uncle, Nalapat Menon. Her poems were written both in English and Malayalam. Her poetry was not of a regular kind. When the readers were tired of reading the Victorian morality, which focused on suppression of sexuality and maintaining strong moral principles, the poetry of Kamala Das became a poetry of retaliation. She was respected for showing her feminine sensibility. She unburdened her heart through her poems. Her poems reflected a constant yearning for love and a non-fulfilment of sexuality. Her voice and thoughts in her poems became a voice of retaliation and thoughts of empowerment.

A Confessional Poet

Kamala Das was essentially considered to be a confessional poet. Confessional poetry began to evolve in the United States during the 1950s. This kind of poetry focused on 'personal' themes which included personal traumas or tragedies, and it also contained those themes which were not openly discussed before and were considered taboo. Such themes included personal sexuality, depression, personal failures, difficult experiences in relationships and so on. Hence, we can say that confessional poetry was replete with subjective experiences. Confessional poetry could not be considered as 'Art for art's sake' as

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the focus of the poem could not be its aesthetic sense but the cathartic and therapeutic function. The readers of confessional poetry often relate themselves to the subject matter of the poem. In a similar vein, the confessional novels too serve the same purpose. For example, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* which describes the protagonist's indecisiveness between her domestic life and a career as a poet. This kind of indecisiveness is what every woman struggles with and therefore it becomes a story of 'everywoman'.

About Her Personal Journey

Kamala Das' poetry was about her personal journey. She made a confession of her strong emotions and her biggest hurdles of life. What is so remarkable about her is the fact that she uses the power of language to subvert the omnipotent patriarchal structures in the society. Her sentiments are voiced in her poems with powerful imagery. In her poem *The Looking Glass*, she uses the phrase 'The warm shock of menstrual blood' to show the feminine sensibility. She celebrates her body and womanhood by writing:

*Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers.*

Her works correspond to the second wave of feminism when female sexuality and a woman's sexual longings became individualistic. Where Betty Friedan in 1960 wrote a book *The Feminine Mystique*, speaking out for the generation of college-educated housewives in America who felt trapped in the domestic life and were also not give an equal status along with their husbands. Kamala Das, through her poetry voices out the predicament of Indian women who are denied their sexual freedom in married life. She was very resolved to change the current status of womanhood in India. Through her poems, she often talked about marriage that was like a prison for women as a woman could not find any emotional belongingness with her husband in the institution of marriage. In her poem *Freaks*, she writes:

*The heart,
An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence.....*

Homi Bhabha in his famous essay *Signs Taken For Wonders :Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817*, taken from the book *The Location of Culture*, emphasizes the significance of language and how that language when made hybrid, can be used to challenge authority. Kamala Das realises this significance of language and uses it as her weapon to challenge the patriarchal structures of society. Virginia Woolf in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), remarked that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction".

An Introduction

Kamala Das in her poem *An Introduction* writes how she dresses like a boy so that she may enjoy a sense of gender equality, but then she is asked to behave like a woman. She goes on to tell us how the society wants her to 'become a woman'. Simone de Beauvoir once said in her book *The Second Sex* "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". It is the society that asks a woman to behave like one. Kamala Das tries to explain it through the lines:

*Then ... I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role. Don't play pretending games.
Don't play at schizophrenia or be a
Nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love ...*

Women Have Greater Power to Love

According to Kamala Das, women have greater power to love, to care and to be more affectionate than a man. Therefore, the women enjoy a special status and a unique role, compared to men. When Kamala Das felt rejected in love, her psychological defence mechanism led her to become creative. She found the purgation of her anxious emotions

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through her poetry. It became her vent for her hurt ego, conflict, failure and disappointment in marriage. She writes it in her poem *The Prisoner*:

As the convict studies
His prison's geography
I study the trappings
Of your body, dear love
For I must someday find
An escape from its snare

Use of Human Anatomy

There is no doubt about the fact that Kamala Das has been criticised for bringing out the human anatomy in her poems. She has been labelled as indecent and vulgar too for the sexual freedom and explicit content used in her writings. But she has rightly been able to project the sexual incompleteness, sterility and barrenness a woman feels in her marriage. Her themes provide the reader with a glance to look into the feminine sensibility in its completeness. The reader while reading Kamala Das, gets to know the deeper recesses of a female heart. It will not be an underestimation to say that her poetry is a powerful tool to question the uneven gender roles.

In Love

Her poem *In Love*, she shows her disgust for her husband who uses her body. The title of this poem is indeed very ironic as she talks only about the physical love and not the spiritual love with her husband. She blames her husband for his lust who loves her for her body. She calls him "carnivorous" for he is full of lust.

“Of what does the burning mouth of sun,
burning in today's
, Sky, remind me..... oh, yes, his Mouth,
andhis limbs like pale and

Carnivorous plants reaching

Out for me, and the sad lie

Of my unending lust”

Conclusion

The cosmos of Kamala Das’ poetry is completely personal, it is a world which she has created. She acts as a mouthpiece of the condition of thousands of Indian women who suffer from disillusionment and loneliness in their life. Her poetry is a journey towards self-realization and a quest for an individual personality. Her expression is unbridled, spontaneous, candid and daring. Her language is simple, straightforward and self-explanatory. Her poetry is "an acknowledgement and a celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman".

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