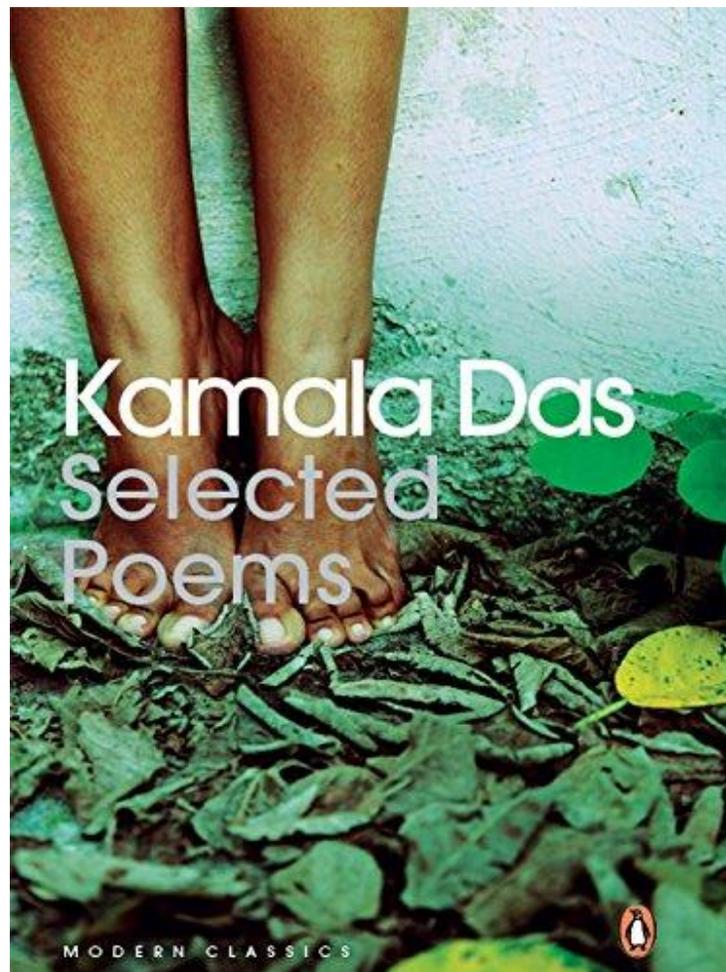


**The Voice of a Rebel Woman against Patriarchy:
A Study of Kamala Das's Select Poems**

Trailakya Roy, M.A. (English)



Abstract

Kamala Das is one of the major poets in contemporary Indian English literature mainly known because of her fiery voice in her poems. In her poems feminine sensibilities find its best

expression. Though her works are generally labeled as autobiographical and confessional, her open treatment of female sexuality and guileless guiltless frankness in writing make her a rebel icon among the Indian poets. Unlike other poets her poetry is free from “19th century diction, sentiment and romanticized love”. Her poems are filled with a crystal-clear note and tone of a rebel woman as she speaks openly about her position in male dominated society and with its prevalent orthodox patriarchal mores where “one is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman.” Eunice de Souza claims that Das has “mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms.” She has transcended the role of a poet and her books of poems become the language of a rebel woman who observes and examines the silences of Indian women and criticizes the patriarchal hegemony through her open and fiery lines. In Indian society where speaking of sex or passion is considered as dirty or taboo but Kamala Das uses the very things as medium of protest in her poems because these are the very things that the women are supposed to give unconditionally. This paper would try to point out the elements and tone of a rebel woman poet as she quite openly speaks about her subjugated position in society against patriarchal conventions.

Keywords: Kamala Das, poems, sexuality, rebel, self-expression, patriarchy, boldness, feminist, postcolonial study

Introduction

Kamala Das (31 March 1934- 31 May 2009) was born in Punnayukulam, Trissur district in Kerala. An honest and open treatment of female sexuality through her fiery poems and autobiography make her an iconoclast in modern English poetry. She is the recipient of several prizes and awards: Asian World Poetry for Literature, Sahitya Academy Awards, and the PEN Asian Poetry Prize. She was shortlisted for Nobel Prize in 1984 along with Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer and Margaret Yourcenar. Her collection poetry includes Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973), Collected Poems I(1984), The Best of Kamala Das(1991) and Only the Soul Knows How to sing(1996). She has also a daring autobiography, My Story (1976). She “wrote chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish, and the Indian readers responded sympathetically to her guileless, guiltless frankness with regard to sexual matters. Ms. Das abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic, and somewhat

sterile, aestheticism for an independence of mind and body at a time when Indian women poets were still expected to write about teenage girlie fantasies of eternal, bloodless, unrequited love”(The histrionics of Kamala Das). Because of her confessional style and open treatment of female sexuality, her poems led to comparisons with Marguerite Duras and Sylvia Plath. “On account of her extensive contribution to the poetry in our country, she earned the label ‘The Mother of Modern Indian English Poetry’ (The Indian Express).

Kamala Das: A Rebel against Patriarchy

In “An Introduction” she rebels against those who ask her “Don’t write in English...English is not your mother tongue.”-

*“Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you- Why not let me speak in
Any language I like.”(An Introduction, 8-11)*

Though her language may sound funny because of half-English and half-Indian but it voices her joys, longings and hopes and fits to her “as cawing is to crows or roaring to the lions.”Then she describes her first encounter with a male as her body shows sign of changes- she became tall, her limbs swelled, and hair sprouted in her private parts. She claims, “I was a child” and she asked for love and she was taken “into the bedroom and closed the door” after her marriage. She was not beaten there but her “sad woman-body felt so beaten” because she was not prepared for the significant changes that her body goes through because of pregnancy.

*“The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.
I shrank pitifully...” (An Introduction, 31-32)*

So as a mean of protest like a rebel she wore a shirt, her brother’s trousers, cut her hair short ignoring her womanliness against those who asked her to ‘become’ a woman-

*“Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife... Be embroider, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants...”*

*Be Amy, or be Kamala.Or, better
Still, be Madhavikutty”(An Introduction, 35-41)*

Prevalent Orthodox Male Dominion

Kamala Das has made an honest treatment of prevalent orthodox male dominion in the poem “The Freaks” and depicts the torment and disappointment of a woman in sexual life through her confessional style. Society wants women to be submissive and passive in all aspects of life. A woman has to lead her conjugal life with a man with whom she has no emotional contact at all. But in this poem, there is a note of a rebel woman as in the very beginning of the poem the poet describes the man in question with some unattractive attributes. The woman is repulsive to her husband.

*“He talks, turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam...” (The Freaks, 1-4)*

They want to make love and as he moves his fingers it arouses her “skin's lazy hungers” only but failed to communicate with her soul, her heart remains “an empty cistern”. The image conveys her horror and repulsion in all its intensity. She feels that she may be unnatural and freakish because she does not behave like a normal submissive woman. So to hide her abnormality she puts on pose of ‘flamboyant lust’. Like a submissive woman she does not remain quit in the four walls but speaks against the prevalent orthodox male dominion in societal conventions. Through the images of her repulsion and horror, she brings out emptiness of love and emotion and sterility of conjugal life in male dominated society.

The Old Playhouse

In “The Old Playhouse” Kamala Das brings out the anxieties, frustrations and contemplations of a woman through the institution of loveless marriage. Through the image of a brilliant metaphor she points out the relationship between husband and wife through the historical phenomenon of colonialism with its practices and effects.

*“You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless
Pathways of the sky.”(The Old Playhouse, 1-5)*

In her confessional tone of rebellion against patriarchal dominion she openly and unabashedly describes the position of woman and openly talks about sexuality. She becomes “the first Hindu woman to write frankly about sexual desire” (www.outlookindia.com).

*“You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured
Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed
My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices.”(The Old Playhouse, 10-12)*

She was forced and conditioned to become a wife to perform the household chores and to serve in his needs.

*“To break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins.” (The Old Playhouse, 13-14)*

This kind relationship between husband and wife not only reduced her position to insignificant but also suffocated her physically and psychologically.

*“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 Old Playhouse, (14-17)*

Das refers to the story of Narcissus at the end of the poem to point out the woman’s agonizing experiences. The woman realizes that his love is based on physicality instead of emotional bonding. His love for her is solely for himself, like the mythical Narcissus looking at his own reflection amazingly. So. the woman in the last lines seeks a solution.

“It must seek at last

An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors

To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.”(The Old Playhouse, 28-30)

K.R.S. Iyengar remarks “Under the Indian sun, although sensuality lures irresistibly, yet it fails to satisfy feeling and introspection but sound the depths of the oceanic sense of frustration, and the calm of fulfillment eludes forever. Love is crucified in sex, and sex defiles itself again and again” (Iyengar, 677).

The Looking Glass

In “The Looking Glass” Kamala Das searches for self-identity in the male dominant society where a woman has to give up everything to satisfy the male ego by accepting masculinity as superior to femininity. Dr. Sushil Kumar Mishra in his research article mentions that in the poem “the poet has presented utter sense of despair and dejection caused by man’s dominance and exploitation.” (Mishra, 36)

*“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, 13-16)*

Purnima Bali says “The Looking Glass’ which is not only the mirror of her hurt-self but also shows her struggle to achieve identity and individualism.”(Bali, 3)

The Stone Age

In “The Stone Age” Kamala Das frankly speaks about the futility of marital relationships where the husband takes the wife’s identity and forced her to live in a dehumanized condition. According to Hindu beliefs marriages are made in heaven and marriage is the bonding of two souls for seven lifetimes. But the frequent use of “I” and “You” clearly indicates that there is no emotional bonding between them. She sarcastically calls her husband “Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment” that snatched her full individuality and freedom and turned her into a

lifeless showpiece of “a bird of stone, a granite dove” in his house. The husband almost ignored her comforts and wants and even disturbed her peace of mind through her inappropriate behavior.

*“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.”(The Stone Age, 4-7)*

So, the woman dissatisfied in her marital relationship goes against the moral code of society and seeks love through extra-marital relationship “at another’s door.” She willfully takes revenge against her husband who neglected and enslaved her to the position of lifeless showpiece. “For her ideal love is the fulfillment of the levels of body and mind. It is the experience beyond sex through sex. The tragic failure to get love in terms of sexual-spiritual fulfillment from her husband leads her to search for it elsewhere” (Iyer, 203).

The Sunshine Cat

In “The Sunshine Cat” the poet mentions the pathos of a woman who failed to get real love either from her husband or from her lovers. They all loved her but denied her the spiritual thrills of love. Unfortunately, her husband whom she loved most even failed to satisfy her emotional needs. He never thought of having emotional rapport with her but remained a ruthless watcher to keep a close watch on her relations with other men.

*“Being selfish
And a coward, the husband who neither loved nor
Used her, but was a ruthless watcher.”(The Sunshine Cat, 2-4)*

The Prisoner

In the poem “The Prisoner” the poetess brings out the position of a woman through the comparison between a convict and a woman who indulged in sexual act. The convict in prison studies the conditions of its boundaries to escape and the woman indulged in sexual activity studies the trappings of her lover’s body to escape from its snare.

“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.”(The Prisoner, 1-6)*

In Love

In the poem “In Love” the poet again exposes the unhappy relationship with her lover which is completely based on physical coupling. She feels her body as consumed by her lover in unpleasant ways.

*“O what does the burning mouth
Of sun, burning in today's,
Sky, remind me....oh, yes, his
Mouth, and....his limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
Out for me.”(In Love, 1-6)*

Conclusion

To conclude it can be said that the poems of Kamala Das has a clear note of a rebel woman who raises her voice against the insensible and dehumanized treatment of women in all aspects of life in a male dominated society. “Her poems are revolt, and the revolt is the outcome of all her dissatisfaction and psychological traumas” (Sheeba). Throughout her poems, she speaks in an “aggressively individualistic” tone against the male dominion that makes the life of a woman passive and submissive to insignificant and lifeless. She examines the silences of women in male dominated society, feels the alienation of self and the burden of becoming a woman, experiences the lover's betrayal and dehumanized treatment of her husband. However, she does not remain quite like a submissive and obedient wife but questions the conventional role of woman in family and society and rebels against the patriarchal mores of society through fiery voice in her poems. She speaks up openly about the pains of becoming a woman and marital rape through the institution of marriage where there is no true love that snatches not only a woman's liberty and individuality

but also suffocates her physically and psychologically. Though apparently it seems that Kamala Das wrote about her life and her experiences because of the repetition of the first person singular “I” in her poems but it is not only about her life and her experience, they become the voice of every rebel Indian woman.

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Trailakya Roy, M.A. (English)
Rabindra Bharati University

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Trailakya Roy, M.A. (English)

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Trailakya Roy
Satkura
Jalpaiguri
West Bengal, India
PIN-735122
trailakyar@gmail.com