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# KAMALA DAS: “AS A VOICE OF MANY INDIAN WOMEN”

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## ABSTRACT

*Kamala Das was born at Punnayurkulam in Malabar in 1934. Kamala Das started writing poetry at the very young age through the influence of her great Nalapat Narayana Menon, a prominent writer. She wrote on love, betrayal, aestheticism for an independence of mind etc. She is considered as one of the outstanding Indian poets writing in English, although her popularity in Kerala's based chiefly on her short stories and autobiography. Much of her writing in Malayalam came under the penname Madhavikutty. Kamala Das is probably the first Hindu Woman to openly and honestly talk about sexual desires of Indian woman, which gives her an identity of her generation. Kamala Das impresses by very much being herself in her poems, with her distinct feminine tone. In a male dominated society, she has tried to highlight her feminine and personal identity. Her realization of being treated as the 'other' by the Patriarchal social order compelled her to find a medium through which she can raise voice to her pent up feelings and emotions. Her poetry is poetry of revolt, and the revolt is the outcome of all her dissatisfaction and psychological traumas.*

*While dealing with the theme of love in her poetry, she describes love in various moods invariably extend towards man-woman relationship and the sexual tensions thereof. Eventually, she utilizes sexual and erotic imageries also. She presents the theme of love and sex in a convincing manner. This attitude is developed because of the change in outlook on sex and love. All along, the image of an Indian woman has been the one that is sanctified by our spiritual heritage. This legacy came through religious works, mythology and folklore, which carefully avoid mentioning the significance of sex in the life of a woman. Kamala Das feels that what she gets in the name of love is nothing more than physical love. She feels that man is always crazy of lust. Sexual union with him gives no satisfaction; rather it gives pain. She expresses the tension caused by male dominance in her poems. She is frustrated by the indifference of men towards their status. She is a victim of the sexual harassment, who needs to be liberated from this tradition. She demands something more than the mere physical love.*

**KEYWORDS:** Quest for liberation, Confessional, Male dominated society, Self identity, Frustration

## INTRODUCTION

In the post-independence period of India, a group of modern women writers in English made their presence felt by having a distinct sense of their identity. They are not conventional, not influenced by sources like epics, myths, legends and folktales. They are well educated, bold and convincing. They understand the meaning of male domination. This period marks a change in the attitude, outlook, themes, imagery, and use of language - clearly differing from their predecessors.

Many Indian women poets in English made their debut in the 1960s. Noted among them are, Kamala Das, Monika Varma, Margaret Chatterjee, Ira De, Roshan Alkazi, Sujatha Modayil, Mamta Kalia, Gauri Deshpande and so on.

These writers vouchsafe feminine experience and a new personal vision. Their subject matter is quite different from their predecessors. They make literature as a platform to carry forward their feministic thoughts and beliefs. They try to discard self which lay hidden under the cultural and patriarchal myths of selfhood. They portray their experiences and real life situations through characters specifically created for this purpose.

These writers are endowed with creative genius. They are mostly confessional. They write about their personal experiences, displaying feminine sensibility. They develop the theme of man-woman relationship. They depict frustrations of women living in a male-dominated society and they deal with themselves like love, lust, sex, sorrow, grief etc. They are the pioneers to explore some exclusive female areas of sensuality and sexuality. They do not hesitate to discuss subjects like childbirth, menstruation, masturbation, lesbianism and so on. Thus, the post-independence scenario presents a better indulgence of Indian women writers, who have created their own space in English poetry, through their wonderful creations.

The general family background of these women poetess typical. Almost all of them belong to highly modern, educated and urban families. They are convent educated and qualified. They are different from the traditional pattern of Indian womanhood. They are not flexible to adjust to the old way of family life. They cannot tolerate forced adjustment, compromise and submissiveness. Consequently they rebel against the conventional role of women in society and struggle to establish their new identity. They do not hesitate to express their feelings and bitter experiences in their writings. Confessional poetry is a new branch of modern poetry. These confessional poems are intensely personal, highly subjective. There is no "persona" in the poem. "I" in the poem is the poet and nobody else.

They are in variably confessional poets. They candidly present a touching account of their own self from within. Love, as exchanged between the self and the man in her life, is the most important theme used by any feminist woman poet, while coming out with her confessions.

The main concern of Kamala Das as a poet is sexual frustration and the failure of marriage in the life of a woman. The theme, namely the failure of a woman to achieve happiness through her sexual relationship with her husband and even through a similar relationship with other men, recurs in poem after poem by Kamala Das. Her poetry is largely autobiographical and confessional. The frustration resulting from total failure of her marriage and search for happiness through indiscriminate sexual relationships with other men constitutes a very large component of her poetry.

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The confessional poetry is the poetry of introspection, self-expression and self-revelation. A confessional poet more often takes the reader into confidence by revelation of his/her personal and private life, and also unravels those facets of life which an ordinary man, though that person is a poet, would confine to himself/herself because of the intricate nature of those facets. A confessional poet has to discard all of his/her reservations and to write straightforwardly, candidly, and in an unambiguous manner, thus breaking the restrictions and restraints which the social/ethical code and the customs of society impose upon him/her.

The confessional poet uses his/her particular experiences for the following reasons—to record the immediacy of their experience and its specific nature, to suggest that such experience might be relevant to men/women universally and to possibly explore ways and means of transforming them into the positive. Confessional poetry is a monopolistic field for poetry and such a genre requires qualities like sensitivity, understanding and empathy, but most of all a passion to liberate oneself from the complexity of life and male domination towards a life of hope, liberty and meaning. Kamala Das is well known for her bold and forthright expression.

Kamala Das is primarily a confessional poet, and in this context, she may be regarded as a remarkable Indo-Anglian poet comparable to the American poets such as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Kamala's poetry is confessional and autobiographical. She shows in her poetry about her own frustrations and failures in a male dominated world, and shows how she tried to maintain her individuality and feminine identity and how from this rebellion issued all her troubles, frustrations and psychological traumas.

Kamala Das poetry is essentially the poetry of woman. Her poetry centers round Kamala Das as a woman, as a wife, as a sexual partner for many man besides her husband and as a mother. Her feminine sensibility is the motivating and governing force behind her poems; and it is this sensibility which has given to her poetry a distinctive character. Other Indian woman also have written poems

Showing their feminine sensibilities but Das in this respect far more ahead. The woman character in her poems plays various roles- the unfulfilled wife, mistress to lusty men, silent long-suffering women etc. Her main concern is the pathos of women. No other Indian poet has expressed herself as frankly, as clearly on the subject of a woman's right to object and revolt and on the subject of love in its various forms and moods as Kamala Das has in her poetry. She is a representative, of fervent Feminist voice and she becomes the spokeswoman of all the victimized women in society.

Kamala Das feminine sensibility appears most emphatically and forcefully in poem in which she has described the temperament and disposition of her husband. "The old Play House" is one of the poems which are permeated by her feminine sensibility. Her feminine sensibility revolted against her husband's manner of making love to her. His love making involved only lust and showed no love at all. Only a bold woman would thus express her disgust with a husband who seeks only the glorification of his lust, neither giving love to, nor expecting love from her. This is feminine sensibility voicing its protest against a man who performs the sexual act in a mechanical and unemotional way just to satisfy his lust. K. K. Singh elaborates on this view point,

Physical satisfaction is necessary in love, but it should be accomplished by intellectual and spiritual fervor. The poet describes the physical aspect of man's interest. The man does not show any kind of consistency and warmth in his attitude towards woman. The man is not able to cross the skin of a woman because he lacks proper stamina. The man is not able to respect the advances of a woman's emotional needs (Singh 109).

The poet's feminine sensibility influences her poetic outlook as well as poetic world. Her voice becomes so powerful in her poems that she seems to be a mouthpiece of feminine movement in India. 'The Old Playhouse' presents the pathetic and gloomy condition of a girl in different manner. The protagonist compares herself to a swallow (bird). Her husband wanted to tame her and keep her fully under his control by the power of his love making.

The wife is victim of her husband's ego and false vanity she is quite busy in arranging her husband's daily routine. She has no time to look after own ambitions and pleasures. Finally, the poet deals with the alienation and suffering of the women in the hands of the man. The protagonist feels that her freedom is encroached. Her life is supposed to be the old playhouse where there is no light.

*Kamala Das represents definition of poetry stated by Wordsworth that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.*

She gives a free rein to a series of emotions which find place not only in her poetic works but also her short stories and novel. For rendering color and life to her expressions, Kamala Das chooses words and the language which has a uniqueness of their own. Though, for a first time reader, she may turn out to be more explicit and going little overboard in her treatment of sexual love. Kamala Das exceeds the permitted limit for a lady in the male dominated society in her description of the following as stated by I.K. Sharma,

Marriage, wedding drums, bedrooms, bride bouquet, double bed, pillow, mirrors, bangles, bells, gems, sandal scent, musk, dolls, lipstick, perfumes, oils, breast, flesh, mouth, lick, lips kiss, embrace, love, lust, honeymoon, hair, pigtails, legs, heart, womb, spittle, pubis (Sharma 42).

There are essentially two sides to Kamala Das's poetry. One is that which is extraordinary centered around her own self, probing the malaise and Morbidity that seem to clamp on her poetic vision. In the poem, "An Introduction" she expresses her self-assertive statement attacking on conventionalism, advocating the rights of women and introducing herself as an Indian of a very brown complexion, born in Malabar having the ability to speak three languages:

I am Indian, very brown, born in  
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in\

Two, dream in one (4-6).

The other side is a compelling expression of personal experiences and a forceful subjective voice. However, this voice is so strong that it extends beyond the personal world of anguished feelings and assumes wider significance. In this context, one can find such tastes and expectations in her poetry like, "The Sunshine Cat", "The Old Playhouse", etc. In her poem "An Introduction", Kamala Das revolts against the set of rules meant for women breaking the conventional womanhood, compelling her to become a traditional feminine role "Dress in sarees, be girl,  
Be wife ....Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or better  
Still, be Madhavikutty"(33-39).

On the hand, she searches for her own identity, wishing to be autonomous in decisions. In the following lines, she speaks herself in the strong voices:

I wore a shirt and my Brother's trousers,  
Cut my hair short and ignored / my womanliness (31-33).  
I am sinner,  
I am saint, I am the beloved and the  
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no  
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I (56-59).

Apart from this, Kamala Das poetry embodies agonies or women emerging from the state of subjugation and bondage and speaks about the emancipation of women in a male-dominated society, and seeking to

establish their identity and/ or the self that mark in her poems like “A Relationship”, “Summer in Calcutta”, “Marine Drive”, etc. In the poem “Afterwards”, she expresses the secret hope and fear of Womanhood

Son of my womb,

Ugly in loneliness.

You walk the world's bleary eye

Like a grit-your cleverness

Shall not be your doom

As ours was. (1-6)

In this context, “C.R. Nambiar” shares his observation about the essence of Kamala Das poetry, “She becomes a feminist writer by making her women conscious and providing them wings to rise and flutter... The essence of her poems is struggle about her own self and... is a cry for freedom” (122). Along with this, her poetry shows a landmark in her female journey from victimization to consciousness. Searching for the self / the identity as the crucial point of her poems, Kamala Das says: “One's real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one, who has decided to travel inward, will realize his route has no end” (109). Her poems such as “The Freaks”, “My Grandmother's House”, “A Hot Noon in Malabar”, “The Old Playhouse”, “The Conflagration”, etc. reflect her journey of the self towards the ultimate. She, however, cannot escape from the inner world that makes her the dilemma of personality.

Kamala Das's poetic self is made up of millions of Indian women. Her voice is the voice of Indian women silenced through ages of suppression. Kamala Das writes about the plight of womanhood in Indian society with Amazing Truthfulness. It is difficult for a woman to preserve her rationality, let alone her identity! She writes:

"I must pose,

I must pretend,

I must act the role

Of happy woman

Happy wife

I must keep right distance

Between me and the low

And I must keep right distance

Between me and the high" (The Suicide)

## CONCLUSION

Kamala Das is a revolutionary poet who started the trend towards frankness and openness in the treatment of a subject which was considered to be a taboo and hardly any woman poet dared to deal with.

. It can be said that she is far ahead of many Indian writers in her ideas, unconcerned about what others think of her. Her poetry highlights the miseries of forlorn women and the treatment meted out to them in a male dominated society. Controversies became the constant companion of her poetic achievements.

Kamala Das raises her voice against women's socialization into a whole-hearted acceptance of their destiny in terms of inferiority, passivity, submissiveness and dependence. She protests against the rigid gender divisions that sexist culture wishes to establish – divisions according to which men are superior, God-like, while women are inferior, inert, afflicted with a natural defectiveness. There is colonization not only in terms of social existence but also in terms of sexual domination. Man seems to possess every right to satisfy himself while a woman is supposed to make mute and positive response only. The excessive

domination makes the marital bond a mechanical relationship in which self-respect, freedom and independent judgment come to an end.

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