

A Study on the Contribution of Kamla Das to Indian English Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The first generation of modern English poets, who established a new poetics for themselves and made a fresh start in both theme and style around the 1960s, includes Kamala Das (1934–2009), who belonged to this generation. The creative genius of Kamala Das, one of the most prominent voices of protest in Indian English Literature is often compared to the American poet Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton as both of them used the confessional mode of writing in their poetry. Kamala Das, born in 1934 in Thrissur district of Kerala emerged as a distinctive poetic voice with the publication of the first volume of her poetry *Summer in Calcutta*. In her poems Kamala Das has always raised a voice against the conventionalized figure of a woman, seeking a more dignified and honourable position for woman as an entity. In fact her poetry addresses the most critical issue in the contemporary society-the need to awaken the women. Her poetry collections include- *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendents* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Otherpoems* (1973), *Tonight, This Savage Rite* (1979), *The Collected Poems* (1984). *My Story* published in 1976 is her autobiography.

Keywords: Radical Voice, Feminism, Kamala Das, Identity, Self, Love, Convent, Spiritual, Conventionalism, Feminist, Image.

Introduction

A woman's attempt to self discovery leads to interrogate that she has not been only born as a woman but she becomes one as she is hardly a product of socio-cultured environment in the making of which she has any part. Her true identity is smothered by the ubiquitous, all pervasive, too dominant and too oppressive patriarchal culture which pushes and assigns her a place away from centre to periphery to a margin of existence. To define and salvage herself, to find out who she is and what she has lost too break the fetters of servility, it becomes imperative that she opens up, she ventilates to unleash her innermost pangs of guilt, misery, fears, doubts and anxieties to reinstate her experience as woman, so that she can acquire autonomy over her being and discover her true self. This realization triggers off a journey into the recesses of her being and like a phoenix she strives to rise to be reborn. It is this struggle of self-realization that becomes the text of most women writers.

The anxiety of identity and despair are the features of the modernism in literature. Women poets write with an intension of breaking the century's old silence and crossing the patriarchal threshold. "The modern and contemporary poetry of women is a social, literary and linguistic document on Feminism, Post-modernism and Post-colonialism" (King, 201). Feminism is a movement and revolution against discrimination of women on the basis of gender, legal, economical and political levels. The word 'Feminism' is derived from the Latin word 'femina' meaning 'woman'. Alice Rossi was the first to use it. This movement was to explore new images of women due to their oppression. This oppression can diminish only if men become more aware on this structure called as 'patriarchy'. Feminists have been either activists or theorists. The feminist activities tired for the survival of women against social wrongs whereas theorists had debates on theory and concept of the term 'Feminism'. This movement started from western part when the suffragists won the vote in 1918 in Britain and in 1920 in America. And in 1960 various activists such as militant feminism, Marxist feminism and radical feminism started working towards the discrimination.

The feminism can be classified into two waves as first and second. The first wave prominently dealt with the equalities and the second with the women's oppression of patriarchal world.

'*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*' (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft succeeded on having the public attention towards the women's condition. After a huge gap of almost one hundred sixty years, there came another work 'The Second Sex' by Simon de Beauvoir. In 1960, the second wave of feminism was in full form and raised voice against oppression of women. Indian feminism has its deepest roots on thoughts of reformers like Raja Ram Rao, Jyotiba Phule and thinkers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi who had strong desire to eradicate the evils prevailing in the society as Sati, child marriage, widowhood etc. In India feminist movement could not get started so easily because of traditional clutches. In 1960s and 1970s this scenario was changed when a protest was held against eve teasing in Hyderabad. Many organizations were set up to reveal and solve the problems of women. Even some magazines and journals were published in regional languages.

Many Indian feminists are dealing with family violence, education and female sexuality. Feminist theorists Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Tolpade Mohanti, Mandakranta Bose who are living in West are helping in improvising the condition of Indian women. Feminist theory has defined aims as establishing a feminine perspective, exposing patriarchy system. As women who have been reprimanded, rejected or dismissed by the establishment know writing is a subversive activity in patriarchal societies. To take up the pen and write one's destiny is the ultimate transgression, which is why the first and most fundamental censorship for women is the denial of the right to read and write. Women's accounts, when they are written down, are full of stories about their struggle to get educated and the obstacles they encountered in the way. Secrecy, concealment, rebellion and fear recur like leitmotifs in their journals and dairies. Many used male pseudonyms to conceal their identities – a practice still in use among some common writing in Urdu in Hyderabad – and several did not make their work public at all. Tamil writer Ambai's story '*The Squirrel*' is a most evocative rendering of the place accorded to women's writing in the literary archive.

In India, too, the women's movement has been critical in the recovery of women's writing, in breaking the silence that enveloped their experience. The question of voice, the power of the word, the subtle, implicit, pervasive, insidious controls imposed on women by culture and society, family and community, have been taken up by women writers and academics and gradually, a space has been created where women's writing and creative expression can be discussed without fear of dismissal. Women writers are more visible today than they have ever been before, largely as a result of the systematic surfacing of their work by women's presses, critics, teachers and activists who have been part of the women's movement and broadly share its politics.

Thus, today feminism must be viewed as a rapidly developing major critical ideology or system of ideas in its own right. The concept incorporates a broad spectrum of ideas and possesses an international scope. Its development stages have historically been dependent on and in tension with male – centered political and intellectual discourse but whose more recent manifestations transcend the latter. The present day feminist thought seeks to destroy masculine's hierarchy but not sexual dualism. This acts as rebalancing factor between women and men of the social, economic and political power within a given society. It is viewed as humanistic philosophy. It still remains a political challenge to male authority and hierarchy in the most profound sense. But today the theorists in describing its ultimate vision prefer the word 'transformational' to the term 'revolutionary'.

Indian women poets:

In 1960, Indian poetry began to establish its existence. In pre-independence period only two women poets showed their presence through their poems. First was Toru Dutt (1856-77) who would have been one of the finest poets of the century if she had lived a few more years. She died at the age of twenty-one only. Through her poetry, she tried to create women's free identity:

"He for his deeds shall get his due
As I for mine: thus here each soul
Is its own friend if it pursue
The right" (Dutt, 67).

Second woman poet was Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) who published various lyrics, talked about the relationship of a man and woman. She protested against discrimination of man:

"You held a wine cup in your fingertips,

Lightly you raised it to indifferent lips,
Lightly you drank and flunk away the bowl....
Alas! It was my soul....." (Naidu 200).

Indian English Poetry was transformed with the publication of "*A Time to Change*" in 1952 by Nissim Ezekiel. It was really the time to change and the prominent faces in this change are Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, Gauri Deshpande, Imtiaz Dharker, Mamta Kalia, Sujata Bhatt, Mukta Sambrani, Menka Shivdasan, Suniti Namjoshi, Charmayne D'souza, Lakshmi Kannan, Tara Patel, Malanie Silgado etc. One of the fast developing genres of Indian literature was poetry. With changing scenario, women were coming into the field of Indian English literature. Their concern was for identity and identity was the process of self-realization and self-definition.

Kamala Das (1934-2009) was born at Punneyukulam, Thrissur District in Kerala. The poetry of Kamala Das gives the evidence of being autobiographical as it exposes her sufferings, psyche which is tortured, complexion of woman's sensibility. Her poetry is the result of her childhood experience that she considers herself miserable and "a misfit everywhere" (Das 109). It is confessional poetry through which she expresses her humiliations. Harimohan Prasad has rightly remarked about Kamala Das's poetic works: Her poetry has often been considered as a gimmick in sex or striptease in words, an over expose of body or "snippets of trivia". But the truth is that her poetry is an autobiography, an articulate voice of her ethnic identity, her Dravidian culture. In her, the poetry is fully obliterating Eliot's distinction between the man suffering and the mind creating.

Kamala Das is quite open and frank about her feelings. She is one of the very few poets who talks so openly of her passion. All poems of Kamala Das are her quest identity in traditional society. 'An Introduction' an autobiographical poem by Kamala Das, deals with feminine sensibility. In the poem, she introduces herself as typical brown color Indian. The obsession with love is one of the prominent features of her poetry. The failure to arrive at its highest point leaves her wounded. There are some poems such as 'The Freaks', 'The Old Playhouse', and 'An Introduction'. 'The Looking Glass' which is not only the mirror of her hurt-self but also shows her struggle to achieve identity and individualism.

The confessional poems depend upon the honesty of the writer and Kamala Das has justified it by being self in her poetic works. Some of her confessions about various love episodes have shocked the readers and the critics both. It is stranger because such kind of poetry is coming from an Indian woman who is mostly considered to be shy, silent and introvert. In her autobiography she says: "I was looking for an ideal lover. I was looking for the one who went to Mathura and forgot to return to his Radha. Perhaps I was seeking the cruelty that lies in the depths of a man's heart. Otherwise why did I not get my place in the arms of my husband?" (Das). She enters into marriage with her beautiful romantic ideals but her dreams were shattered when she finds herself in a loveless relationship which she has to carry for long. Then the woman in Kamala Das provoked her to search for love outside her marriage.

The woman in Kamala Das is struggling between passion and tradition. She wants to break the chains around her and wants to be free. She does not want to be domesticated because her real self will be vanished as she says in '*An Introduction*':

"Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroidered, be cook,
Be a quarreler with 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."

Kamala Das encountered death once like Sylvia Plath, but fortunately escaped from that. After that, in all her poetry she is questing for love which makes her an optimist. Regarding her open expression of feelings E. V. Ramakrishnan says, "Comparing to the poems of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Theodore Roethke, the poems of Kamala Das lack in the unifying stream that has to run through the various shifting moods. Her poems are need of a patient writing and delivering of thoughts in a

spontaneous rhythm. At the level of ideas, her poems are extremely compressed and dynamic on the verge of bursting” (34).

Kamala Das through her poetry not only expresses the inner feelings but she also projects herself as a feminist poetic voice who is always asking for a dignified place of honour. As Indian women poets show a sensitive awareness of their milieu and seeking certain corrective measures for the historical wrong done to womanhood. All this leads to the crisis of identity.

As a confessional writer, there is a characteristic tendency in her two plays “the literal self more and more at the centre of the poem” (Rosenthal 27). For the proper understanding of her poetry, a psycho biographical approach can not be all together ruled out. We shall have an appropriate feedback of her personal life, her loneliness and romantic intimations of morality, while studying the love life of Kamala Das. At various occasions, death seems an easy escape for her from the loneliness of life. She was haunted by the idea of suicide because death seems like a mystical experience which she finds desirable because life is not going to be made new.

Das’s poetry is most convincing to those readers who approach it to identify themselves with the inner sight of the poet and see the world through the eyes of a haunted woman. Most of her poetry concerns itself with the poet’s intensely felt need for declaring her autobiography to the world. Her poetry is all about herself, about her desire for love, her emotional involvement and her failure to achieve such a relationship. Her poetry is criss-crossed by soul searching, self analysis, introspection and looking deep into oneself, which is why she is called one of the best Indian English woman poets of modern times.

Conclusion

One of the most honest Indian poets currently working in English is Kamala Das. Her poetry is entirely about her, about her intensely felt need for love and emotional connection as well as her failure to find such a connection. Therefore, understanding her poems requires familiarity with her life and personality. Her poetry presents Indian woman in a way that has outraged the usual male sense of decency and decorum. As she inaugurates a new age for women poets, she constitutes a total rejection of the conventional styles of poetic expression of the dominant culture or the male-oriented universe. Her poetry is the acknowledgement and celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman, not celebrating unbridled sensuality, but projecting the stereotype of a wronged woman and at once asserting the need to establish her voice and identity. Finally, she is successful in her venture of searching the ultimate self and the identity through the art of confession.

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