

Self-Expression as Self-Affirmation in Kamala Das's Poetry

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Abstract

Indian women poets writing in English from Toru Dutt to Kamala Das reveal the incredible variety of theme as well as style that poetry is accomplished of offering. Kamala Das is the greatest woman poet in contemporary Indo-Asian literature. A confessional poet, she displays feminist philosophy in her poems. The note of a feminist sense is an instantly recognizable presence in her works and her conscious attempt to give a jerk to patriarchal gratification makes her much criticized and sensational but genuine voice. My effort in this paper is to mark out how she asserts a resounding identity of a woman, especially of a wife in her poetry and indulges in unambiguous exposition of her feminist identity.

Challenging the established skeleton that construct the 'women' is the main maxim of feminist. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, which is described as feminine". By this cultural process, the masculine in our culture has come to be widely identified as adventurous, active, dominating, rational, the feminine, creative, by logical opposition to such personality, has come to be identified as passive, yielding, coy, poignant and conventional.

Virginia Woolf has called it as a patriarchal society, where male ego takes the assessment and women have to keep silence ignoring their own power and capacity. Women have to keep the position as other in the society where their feelings and emotions are never regarded to be worth of. Even in literature women is described as a negative object and importance is given on those attributes that satisfies male ego according to the norms of society. A woman unknowingly accepts this typecast of women and takes the position of acquiescent sexual object.

Kamala Das, a woman poet in contemporary Indo-Asian literature writes feminist philosophy in her poetry. She is a bilingual writer writing in Malayalam, her mother tongue, under the pseudonym Madhavikkutty and in English. Her poetry expresses chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. Her readers compassionately responded to her frankness with regard to sexual matters. Her early poetry mirrored fierce originality, exploration, bold images of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice. All of them weep for the

lack of attention to structure and craftsmanship of her poetry. Kamala Das, born in Kerala in 1934, is a bilingual writer. She writes in Malayalam, her mother tongue, under the pseudonym Madhavikkutty.

She is the beneficiary of several prizes and awards: the P. E. N. Asian Poetry Prize, Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for fiction, Asian World Prize for literature, Kendra Sahitya Academy Award etc. She was short listed for the Nobel Prize along with Marguerite Yourcenar, Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer. Her poetical collection 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). Kamala Das's English poetry has been available in Europe in French, German, Swedish, and Serb-Croat translations.

While reviewers of Kamala Das's early poetry praised its brutal originality, gallant images, exploration of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice, they lamented that it lacked attention to structure and craftsmanship. Scholars such as Devindra Kohli, Eunice de Souza, and Sunil Kumar find powerful feminist imagery in Das's poetry, focusing on critiques of marriage, motherhood, women's connection to their bodies and control of their sexuality, and the roles women are offered in traditional Indian society.

Kamala Das had an unhappy, dissatisfied life even from her childhood. She was a victim to patriarchal prejudices and discriminations as most women are. She converted to Islam in 1999 taking a new name Kamala

Surayya. It was an action, she said, she had been contemplating for many years. Kamala Das conceives of the male as beast self-pitying in lust with a monstrous ego under which the woman loses her uniqueness.

The strong craving for freedom, including the freedom to rebel, forms the central strain in many of her poems. A woman considers her position of mother more important than a wife. Wholly reliant on man in the world of his making, woman craves to have a child for self-expression as self-affirmation. She enumerates the male felonies in her poems and builds up a structure of protest and rebellion in her poetry. The life of Das's character may be considered a tale of her experiments with love and the repeated failures of her experiments force her ego to be resentful and defiant. She looks upon each encounter as a substitute for the real experience of true love.

When Kamala Das implicit that love and matrimony are poles separately, she searched for a lover. "Though the love affair gives her excitement in the beginning it is accompanied by disillusionment. Her lover is incapable of giving her a blissful experience" (Raveendran 16). Thus her frustration is expressed through her poem "The Freak":

... Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers? ... (*Only the Soul* 59)

Kamala Das's aim as a poet is to underline the predicament of contemporary women beset by the crisis of divided selves. She wants to bring agreement out of this existence. Her poems are extraordinary because they reveal her feelings of fretfulness, unfriendliness, worthlessness, pointlessness, acute sense of isolation, disintegration and loss of identity.

Modern Indian woman's ambivalence is presented through her poems. She seems to have a good deal of the conventional woman in her. She seems to have the combination in herself—wish for domestic security and the desire for independence. Alongside her unfulfilled need for love there is the need to assert, to conquer and to dominate. While her poems describe a longing for a man to fill her dreams with love, she is also proud of her being the seducer, the collector especially of those men who pose as lady killers (Iyer 193-194).

It is thus proved that Kamala Das tried her best to strengthen the position of woman and thus oppose the dominance of man. The influence of patriarchy is found in all religions as well as their scriptures Kamala Das's

poetry is a frank and straightforward expression of feminine sensibility. By her poetry she searches the vital woman. She violates the systematic, customary norms and values in order to protect on an alternative position of woman in society, where she will be given significance and respect.

In her she takes the various roles of miserable woman, unhappy wife, mistress of lusty man, reluctant nymph enthusiast, silent Devadasi and lovelorn Radha in order to present a true picture of the sufferings of woman. She tries to recapture the unhappy woman in the male dominated world. It is the revolt of feminine sensitiveness against male centered ego that takes the dominative role.

Kamala Das's poetry is confessional and autobiographical to a great level, but at era she universalizes what is personal. Because being a woman and wife, she has miniature and methodical knowledge of feminine sensibilities, its utilization, its hurts, its anguishes and its suppression in a male dominated society. She writes from the depth of her own experiences. She exposes the infertility of society where woman is deprived of genuine love and spiritual fulfillment. Thus she remains the pioneer by her bold confessions to the woman poets in modern Indian English poetry.

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