

Identity Crisis and Mode of Confession in the Poetry of Kamala Das

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Abstract

The present paper aims to study selected poems of Kamala Das from her four poetic volumes entitled, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) and a collection of poetry with Pritish Nandy (1990). Kamala Das, an Indian English woman poet brought renaissance in Indian woman writing with her candid confession and bold thought process. She deals with her own experiences which usually sum up her as a rebellion. Hence, in the paper an attempt is made to bring into being the process of self-exploration, self-crisis which leads her towards self-realization and ultimately it results into collective voice of the entire sex. Her poems not only facilitate her suffering, her complex psyche in the domineering society of men but also she has redefined the problems and feelings of women that have remained un-noticed in the Indian literary world. The paper will explore Kamala Das's poems with the available range of scholarship.

Key Words: Self-Exploration, Self-Crisis, Self –Identity, Patriarchy, Matrix of Culture

Kamala Das provides voice to the ill treatments which she received in the male dominated society. It is not an easy task to invite a war between her honest self and the vicious male world. She did it with courage without caring of any allegation. She depicts the survival of every woman in the adverse circumstances. Her poems exhibit collective experiences and the pathetic situation of women. They are bound to choose docility on the name of domesticity and wife-hood. She writes in "An Introduction"

Dress in Sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer,
be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants...
...Don't sit
On walls or peep in through lace-
draped windows.
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better
Still, be Madhavikutty (*Summer in
Calcutta* 59)

Kamala Das is a voice of protest against the stereotyped role assigned to

women in patriarchy. She is a quest figure who asserts her identity in poems after poems. Das shares a ruthless self-analysis in a tone of utter sincerity like a true feminist. Her idea of woman echoes the views expressed by French feminist critic, Helene Cixous who suggested that women must write their body, body is not the site of oppression rather it is source of liberation. They must bring into existence those imageries which are integral to them. In her autobiography "My Story" Kamala Das in order to celebrate her identity as writer she is ready to bid good bye to her doting husband and son. The compulsion for creativity expressed by her is key notion of her identity. Das endeavors to make the personal occurrences relevant for poetic expression for which she uses personal pronoun 'I' incessantly. 'I' emphasizes lyricism which is not worth differentiation between "the man who suffers" and "the mind which creates." Speaker's voice in this genre is unquestionably that of the women. There is no doubt, an obvious distinction

between autobiographical 'I' and a confessional 'I'. The confessional mode does not guarantee of tinkering of fact. The facts are invented by the poet to a great extent on the basis of imagination. Many a time the actual expression is a complex flux. Das gives us a psychological equivalent for her mental state. The bottom lines of Das' poems are the experiences of her own. As a result, she lends the poetry a distinct authenticity. Kamala Das' poetry embodies almost all of the confessional mode's three qualities, as well as an identity crisis. She addresses issues such as sexual humiliation, deep existential anxiety, the struggle to relate private experience to the outside world as a whole, defining one's own identity, and death obsession, among others, in her poems. In a sense, she becomes the collective consciousness of women's voices. Kamala Das is a well-known contemporary Indian English poet. She has achieved distinct position as an Indian English poet and often compared with the great confessional poets like Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Judith Wright. Kamala Das resembles Sylvia Plath in more than one ways. Both of them were victimized by their husbands. Kamala Das revolted against the matrimonial authority in the manner Sylvia Plath did. It gives an impression that whether it is Indian woman or American woman; their sensibilities are identical.

Das is concerned mainly to explicitly denote self-exposure. What actually she has done, poem after poem is that she has revealed her own suffering, and psychological state in her poetry. As it is a very well known feature of this mode of composition she has been mystifying herself in her poetry. She also expresses ardent wish of death in her poems in the absence of love and dignified, reciprocal

response. It is found in this mode of poetry that poet is completely engrossed within her world and forgets outer world. We come across the frank confession by Kamala Das even of those experiences and feelings which are supposed to be highly intimate and extremely personal. Thereby, we notice bold revelation of her sexual experiences in her poems. K R S Iyengar remarks pertinently:

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. Life is cruel mocking bird, like the Dance of Eunuchs. (677)

Kamala Das is a feminist in real sense; women persona tangible in her poems are well trained for not being victim of self pity. Feminism is all about disruption of monolithic patriarchal structure and aims to portray nuances of women's personality. It emphasizes to rediscover and reinterpret literature from women's perspective. Iyengar remarks, "Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man made world."(680)Kamala Das's poetry exhibits the feminist sensibility and approach of new women. M.K. Naik has observed very pertinently in this context:

She has her moments of romantic claptrap and sentimentality also, but the total impression Kamala Das's poetry produces is one of the bold, ruthless honesty, tearing passionately at conventional attitudes to reveal

the quintessential woman
within.(209-10)

Kamala Das in her poems appear to appropriate Elaine Showalter's gynocritical model of writing. Showalter views that different writing of men and women based on their experiences can only provide women an opportunity to be autonomous. Solely womanhood has power to shape women's creativity because men have not undergone women's perspective and problem therefore, "Feminist criticism which itself tries to be biological, to write from the critic's body, has been intimate, confessional, often innovative in style and form." (251)

There are many modern women poets trying to express themselves in English but very few among them are successful like Kamala Das. Undoubtedly she is different; her poems are surcharged with confessional notes through and through. She is outstandingly confessional about her personal experiences, emotional states and psychic obsessions. But there are some critics who charge her of too much frank self-analysis. She has been impeccable and ruthless in the emotional responses in her poetry. Kamala Das has constantly dealt with personal humiliations and traumas, which are prevalent topics in her poems about identity crisis. The tone of her poetry is essentially empathetic and unsentimental in spite of its subject matter being highly personal.

Many Indian critics are of the opinion that Kamala Das voices the sensibility of new emancipated women of India although she is thoroughly subjective. Kamala Das's statement becomes universalized and expresses mass feminine sensibility in the Indian environment in particular, as well as worldwide feminine exploitation and

harassment in general. Frank revelation and bold treatment of private life have nothing exceptional except that it keeps completely nature and themes of confessional mode. She frequently mentions her Nair ancestors and confessional Dravidian skin as part of an ongoing attempt to identify her identity. Dravidian women are accustomed to continually searching for identity and establishing women's freedom from various social constraints. She proves Nair heritage by her frank expressions even of her extra marital sex relations. In fact, she can trace her sexual philosophy all the way back to Dravidian India in South India. This approach in her blood led her to adopt Islam when she remarried a Muslim youth.

It is said about the confessional mode of poetry that it creates a personal mythology, and attempts to redefine one's identity. The major concern of a confessional poet is to harness to imitate subjectivism. The idea of woman as victim appears frequently in Kamala Das' poems. She predominantly writes on the theme of sexual abuse and personal humiliation. She has expressed that 'in the orbit of illicit sex, there appeared to be only crudeness and violence'. The confessions which are made by the poets of this mode are of cathartic in nature. The poets after giving vent to their nostalgic feeling and painful psychological torture get relieved and feel mental repose. The frustration of Kamala Das is born out of the selfish nature of men in whose contact she came. In her poems she reveals those frustrations for finding cathartic relief. Indeed with this purpose she delineates those experiences in her poems like, "The Looking Glass", "Gift him all/Gift him what makes you woman/the scent of/Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts....". The warmth of love and affection seems melting into

lust. She finds only sterile responses. She always survived in the crisis which reflects constantly in her compositions. She regards her body not better than a prison and she feels so because of her deep existential anxiety which is a characteristic feature of confessional poetry. One of the significant features of confessional poetry is to relate the private experiences with the outer world as such. Such conflicts can be found in abundance in Kamala Das' poetry. She has refused to pick a name or a role for herself. She has a strong need to define herself. She expresses her dissatisfaction with women's marginalisation and the concept of the other in a male-dominated societal order. She expresses her protest: "Stand nude before the glass with him / so that he sees himself the stronger one/And believes it so, and you so much more softer, younger, lovelier. Admit your /Admiration". Here, we can have glimpse of Kamala Das's psychological state in the above lines. She views that she has been ardent in her devotion towards her lovers but she has been maltreated by all of them and got only betrayal. The true outer world and inner terrain, as well as the poet's intimate personal experiences, are in constant confrontation. She reflects this in the form of the symbols of the body and soul. The poet expresses her helplessness regarding the rejection of either of these two. Though she has not been able to synthesize the inner and the outer selves of her personality. This sort of failure generates death wish in her. This death wish is one of the significant themes of the confessional mode of poetry. She expresses thus in "Suicide".

I want to be loved

And

If love is not to be had

I want to be dead, just dead. (*The Descendants 2*)

The lines above show how ardently the poet wishes to be loved. Kamala Das has been searching her-self incessantly in the carnal world of desires and wishes that shows her affinity with the western concept of the exploration of the self. As for the search of the self in Indian tradition is concerned it is the self-realization leading to nirvana as in the case of Sita and Savitri. Kamala Das wants either to be loved or to end her life. A similar idea has been expressed in "The Sunshine Cat", she depicts her frustration for the males whom she was attached with:

They did this to her, the men who
knew her, the man

She loved, who loved her not
enough. (Parthasarathy 25)

The above lines show the betrayal that she met in the hands of her lovers and husband. This sort of treatment is commonly to be noticed in any male dominated society. M.K. Naik remarks in this connection:

Like Browning's women, her persona too sees herself in different situations against a concrete background, reaching to incidents in the development of the soul. The intensity of her utterance sometimes results in a lack of verbal discipline and her constant harping upon sex cannot escape the law of diminishing aesthetic returns. (210)

In order to attain a higher level of perception confessional poets court death and disintegration. Kamala Das too expresses in her poetry death and disintegration in ample measure. The tensions are expressed constantly by Kamala Das through shifting moods. She

never tries to establish her body by glorifying it. There are continuous self-questioning and self-assertion which stresses the dominant confessional tone. The poems full of deep biological descriptions are followed by physical rotting, disgust and sickness in poems like, "The old Playhouse", and "Gino" as well as "The Sunshine Cat". She expresses thus:

...being Selfish

And a coward, the husband, who
neither loved nor

Used her, but was ruthless watcher
(Parthasarathy 25).

She constantly suffers from frustration and despondency which she got from her husband who could not respect her love and emotions. He was interested only in her body Naik remarks:

The most obvious feature of Kamala Das's poetry is the uninhibited frankness with which she talks about sex, referring nonchalantly to "The musk of sweat between the breasts" etc. But a closer reading proves that this is not just a cheap exercise in stretching.... Kamala Das's persona is no nymphomaniac. She is simply every woman who seeks love.... But in her heart of hearts celebrating her essential femininity. (209)

The thing that pinches her most is that the male community always poses that it is sympathetic to women. She expresses the modern feminine approach that woman do not require generosity and sympathy. Women, like men, should be valued equally. Even her extra-marital male partners seem sympathizing with her instead of responding with love in exchange. She despises being treated with warmth and pity because neither her

spouse nor her extramarital companions have repaid her affection. She regards herself not as helpless a creature as men regard her. She expresses thus in "The Sunshine Cat":

...and they said each of

Them, I do not love, I can't not love,
it is not

In my nature to love, but I can be
kind to you. (Parthasarathy 25)

This feeling of Kamala Das is universalized. She has raised a voice of protest against the patriarchy:

Her husband shut her

In every morning; locked her in a
room of books'

With a streak of sunshine lying near
the door, like

A yellow cat, to keep her
company.(Parthasarathy 25)

The above quoted lines are of expressive nature. The poet is again hitting the common thinking among men about their wives. They are reluctant to give them freedom and are not even believe them. There can hardly be anything worse for women as the attitude shown by the husband. Women crave for trust and wish for freedom. The way she is treated by her husband can hardly be satisfactory for any woman of any class. The male conservatism and victimization of female is shown on the peak. This sort of approach led her to establish extra marital relationship as resentment from the social norms.

Thus, we can assert that Kamala Das has been quite successful as a confessional poet. She has been bold and frank in expressing most intimate and personal feelings. She has openly penned

down her life and in any society the private life of a woman is of utmost interest. It is for the first time in Indian context that a woman with courage and honesty invited an open war between herself and conservative society. Her autobiographical feelings are universalized and she has proved to be an artist at the core. A number of women have been crushed and sexually abused by men in every society. The male ego hardly agrees with the fact that women are also made of identical stuff with which they are composed of and they need dignified treatment from men. In fact, women especially in the contemporary times are not ready to undergo the undignified treatment any longer. If at all they come across such treatment they would revolt against it most strongly. This aspect is the

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key to the modern feminist approach and it is reflected through and through in the poems of Kamala Das. In her poems there are almost all those features which are to be found in the poetry of confessional mode. Das's work is multidimensional; each work carries woman persona or individual self that emerges from common masses. She raises vociferous criticism and shares every woman's consciousness, only the difference is that she voices herself publically and other woman caught in social codes choose to remain in silence.. Her poems give the readers an impression to rethink on the status and importance of womanhood. They should be given proper response and love otherwise there would be a sort of resentment that would lead to disintegration of society.