

Kamala Das's Poetry : An Instrument to Protest Against the Callous Treatment of Women in India

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Abstract:

The Poetry of Kamala Das has rightly been regarded as confessional and autobiographical poetry; but it may, with equal justice, be labelled as the poetry of protest. The bulk of her poetic output consists of her confessions pertaining to her bitter childhood, unwanted marriage and her vain quest for love by forming indiscriminate sexual relationships with other men. She, through her poetry, expresses her diverse moods such as agonizing guilt, nauseating disgust, hatred towards her counterparts and inhumane bitterness. Kamala Das's marriage proved an absolute failure as her insensitive and inconsiderate husband treated her just a mean of sexual gratification while giving her no emotional attachment or security. Her poetry may be called as the poetry of protest in the sense it conveys her strong and heated disapproval of the system where the women have been treated as a submissive object for ages. Kamala Das seems to be firm to convey her resentment against the male dominance and men's egotistical superiority, thereby endeavouring to impart identity to the Indian women. This paper is an attempt to articulate Kamala Das's fierce feminine sensibility through her poems which reveal the wounds she received in an unsympathetic male-dominated

world. These poems not only depict Kamala Das's aggression against her numb lovers but, by implication, her anger for the other women facing the similar turmoil.

Key words: Agonizing guilt, nauseating disgust, submissive object, men's egotistical superiority, feminine sensibility.

Expression proceeds from the thought processes going on in one's inner self and the happening in the external surroundings and then one is able to give it different hues and colours through appropriate language so as to give it shape of a confessional work. A confessional work most often contains the bold expressions of the foremost changes in the poet's life. Past incidents and the societal factors also play a crucial role in affecting the life a poet who not only describes what happened to him/her but also his/her concern for the people facing the same agonies. Though the work of a poet, especially the woman poet, is connected to the social milieu yet in most of the cases it exposes the adverse effects of the norms of the society on the women in general and the poet in particular. The women poets strive to act, through their works, to raise the consciousness of the women who identify themselves with the characters of those particular literary works. This journey also leads to the thorny quest of their identity and the intense concern for the sufferings for others in their poetry.

Similarly, Kamala Das has also expressed her grievances which took shape due to the crushing tendencies of male authoritarianism in her personal life. She too had dreamt of a lovable husband and a successful marriage but the hard facts of her barren conjugal life shattered her completely so much so that she starting campaigning against the centuries old patriarchal norms that believe in exploiting the feminine sentiments. Consequently, this suppressed existence instigated in Kamala Das a typical manner to protest in opposition of all that goes in the society in the name of patriarchy. She has

partaken in the course of protesting against the self-centred nature of man in being the supreme authority who seldom understands the relative importance and rights of the woman as a person and as a social being. Kamala Das's poetry, a genuine evidence of her personal annoyance and temperament, is the poetry of protest as she stood to rectify everything that has gone wrong in a man-made world which does not really provide chance to the woman to grow as an open and unrestrained individual. The very strategy of Kamala Das's poetry is associated with mood of revolt born of society's treatment of woman as a mere tool or perfunctory instrument. Kamala Das curses the gender dichotomy in explicit terms with such firmness and courage as was hitherto unheard of in the Indian women's tradition. Kamala Das's poems reveal her rebellious attitude against the conventions of the Indian society and the restrictions which the male community has imposed upon her since time immemorial. In the following lines of "The Old Playhouse", she utters this anguish so forcefully:

You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. (Das 2011,1)

The expression 'You called me wife'¹ is noteworthy because of the obvious social necessity due to which the husband-wife relationship survives, for nothing remarkable emerge between the two except the stereotype expectations from the women and man's satisfying woman's survival necessities. Kamala Das's real protest is against such a civilization that has inherently treated woman as an inferior being and expected her to perform the roles imparted by the male- controlled world. Besides the domineering male ego suppresses the woman who loses all her will and reasons and later becomes dwarf. This autobiographical poem thus expresses a vehement voice against the pressure of domesticity and against the male chauvinism in

the routine of family life. Jayakrishnan Nair states, "In fact the whole poetic rebellion in Kamala Das is just a way of recording her protest against a culture that has rendered both man and woman into mutual non-entities in being life-partners. Generations of traditions and conventions verbally dubbed women in a state of passivity and in course of time quite innocuously and ungrudgingly women reconciled to their so-called state of passivity, and gradually got conditioned to the strategically proposed systems and traditions"².

Kamala Das always presented herself as a liberated and unconventional woman in her poems. Kamala Das who was born in an Indian Nair family had to face the loss of individuality and self-respect right from her childhood. Irshad Gulam Ahmed discloses, "She is constantly aware of her matriarchal tradition, and this awareness embodies her anguish as well as her rebellion. Her anguish stems from the perceptions of the vast dividing chasm between the legitimate place of the Nair women as sanctioned by a historical tradition, and the actual subaltern status given to them by a feudal patriarchy"³. In these painful conditions she had to re-think her stand about the society. So, she widened the panorama of her thinking from the narrow south Indian (Nair) mindset to the Global thinking as evident from her poem "An Introduction". She denied her fascination towards the male crafted politics. She knows the names of few politicians but has least interest in Indian politics as she thinks Indian women are discouraged to be the part of politics rather they become the victim of sex politics. She introduces herself in the following way:

I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one.
Don't write in English, they said, English is
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? (Das 2011, 26)

These lines are suggestive of Kamala Das's desire for freedom and independent identity. Besides in the same poem she reacts on the man-made world rules and regulations:

Then...I wore a shirt
And a black sarong, cut my hair short and ignored all of
This womanliness. (Das 2011, 27)

But the force of the society and tradition again pushes her back into sari and expect her to perform the roles of a wife, cook, embroiderer and quarreler with servants. In our society the male viewpoint is actually the society's viewpoint which defines name and role of a woman in the family. The orthodox Indian culture wants woman to adjust as per the demands of her family. Any other role which a woman wishes to play is forbidden according to the patriarchy. The prime duty of woman is to serve her husband and family whereas her satisfaction has no importance. This kind of mindset Kamala Das wanted to change by insisting on women's equal rights in all walks of life. A. N. Diwedi viewed, "In India where love and marriage go hand in hand. It is most unfortunate that such a sensitive women as Kamala Das is tied to a stake whence she cannot fly. Such occurrences are not uncommon in the land of Gandhi and Nehru turning many a women tragic and gloomy in their attitude towards life. Kamala Das has made repeated protest against this sort of attitude in her poetry"⁴.

In another poem "The Freaks" she boldly verbalise her dissatisfaction against the man who is unable to arouse any genuine sensation of love in her. She seems to be stern to revolt against the society that does not allow her to articulate her sexual experience. She demonstrates herself as a rebel who has the right to claim for her physical satisfaction. In fact the poem is the bold statement of her indifference to the sex with her lethargic male partner and her refusal to identify his "skin lazy finger"⁵. Hence she asks the following question:

...Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash

Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy fingers? Who can
Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in love? (Das 2011,11)

The poet's male partner in this poem is a man with 'sun stained cheek'⁶ and 'uneven teeth'⁷ who is a womaniser still he cannot surge on the wings of love and cannot come equivalent to the higher level of fulfillment to Kamala Das's vision of womanhood. Indian women are supposed to be reserved and not expected to express their agony in open. Kamala Das consistently attempted to break this customized image and came forward as an open-minded woman who has the right to claim for her physical-fulfillment and psychological security.

In another poem "Luminol" the poet registers her objection against the skin communicated pleasures and yearns for a deep slumber from which, nothing can awaken her. The poet craves to escape from the sex obsessed world by taking pills and absorbing herself into the refreshing state of sleep. She suggests that one can reach the soul only by intense fulfillment through love and not through lust. The inner miseries expressed in the poems are not only of Kamala Das but of the entire women folk. With accurate poetic attitude Kamala Das is able to identify herself with entire humanity in general and women in particular. In all the races, the manner in which women are put at the back stage and sidelined hurt her a lot. K.R.S.Iyengar says, "Kamala Das is a fierce feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world"⁸. In the poem "The Suicide", she unveils the pain over the women's historical role:

I must prose.
I must pretend.
I must act the role
Of happy woman,
Happy wife. (Das 2011, 35)

Showing what she is not but what is expected is to be precisely termed as pretending. Kamala Das like other contemporary women, is not only forced by the society but also by the patriarchal agents to wear the garb of a happy woman and wife. The continuous strain of her selfish husband and self-centred civilization troubles her which does not give her space to express her dissent over this unwanted imposition. The highly suffocating environment of the city does not allow her to attain her identity as a woman and as an individual. As opined by a critic, "Male engineered violence and terror against women in family is no way lesser than the state terror. In both cases women are victimized, by losing identity and voice. Kamala Das's search for voice, identity, aesthetics and selfhood is a kind of endless war against centuries old rotting patriarchal system"⁹. Kamala Das, through her poetry, reveals her strong-minded attitude to throw away the time-honoured timidity, modesty and dependence on men. The woman, who once found herself fenced in the trap of marital life and almost submitted to the disheartening statements of the male-dominated world, now has the guts to raise her voice. According to her, women must gather the courage to demolish heartless grind of tradition, conventions and orthodoxy that ruthlessly crush the genuine credentials of the feminine qualities. In a poem entitled "Conflagration", she writes:

Woman, in this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man ? It's time again to come alive
The world extends a lot beyond his six-foot frame. (Das 1991,
26)

The above lines call for the reconsideration of the definition of the term called happiness and the poet ask the ordinary woman to extend her thinking beyond the edges of domesticity and womanhood. Kamala Das's poetry channelized the voice of the contemporary Indian educated women who intend to protest

against their subordinate status in patriarchal society in spite of their priceless contribution.

Kamala Das is undoubtedly a poet of love and sex who perpetually writes about the power of love and sexual relationship in the conjugal life. Kamala Das projects herself as poet without any intellectual pride who looks least influenced by the conservatism and tabooed system. She has, therefore, much in her literary sack to say for the miseries of a woman engulfing from an inactive state to the point of identifying her individuality and liberty. More often she not only talks about sexual love but also about her woman persona who rises above in the mood of revolt. She wants to consume whatever comes before her and as a result she feels that she has achieved a 'brighter charm'¹⁰. Like a forest fire, she leaves nothing materialistic or emotional behind her, she gulps everything happens around her. She yells in her poem "Forest Fire" :

Of late I have begun to feel a hunger
To take in with greed, like a forest fire that
Consumes and with each killing gains a wilder,
Brighter charm, all that comes my way. (Das 2011,39)

The poet through this poem wants to convey that the more the adverse circumstances she faces, the stronger she becomes and gets the power to overthrow her annoyance for the narrow-minded and dogmatic structures. She brushes aside the approach of decay and death which she earlier thought as the only answer to her life problems. "Forest Fire" shows that Kamala Das, through her poetic assimilation, transcend the barrier of personal moods and impart universality to the power of womanhood. Kohli states, "Forest Fire, though not a conventional poem of involvement, is an example of the force with which the world outside can move her to poetry"¹¹.

Thus Kamala Das has intelligently employed the confessional modes in order to raise relevant question to the society regarding the woman's troubled identity. Clearly, for a

woman poet like Kamala Das who was against being labeled, let her poetry do all the talking about an ordinary woman. She consistently protested against the egocentricity of the male and lamented at the consequent dwarfing of the female. In fact she was a warring poet fighting against the anti-feminist outlook of the society. By this effort she intended to construct a self-regulating province of women's desires and aesthetics free from male interference. She strongly advocated that women need to remove the mask of ignorance and thoughtless adherence to the outdated man-made rules for their existence.

END NOTES

1. "You called me wife, [...]" (Das 2011,1)
2. Nair 2009, 4.
3. Ahmed 2005, 47.
4. Diwedi 2000, 2-3.
5. "[...]Skin's lazy hungers ?." (Das 2011,11)
6. "[...]sun-stained/Cheek to me," (Das 2011,11)
7. "Uneven teeth gleam, [...]"(Das 2011,11)
8. Iyengar 1985, 680.
9. Shukla 2010,21.
10. "[...] Brighter charm, all that comes my way." (Das 2011,39)
11. Kohli 1968, 33.

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