

Kamala Das and her Feminist Approach

Shubha Mukherjee

Associate Professor, Department of English, Guru Nanak Khalsa College, Matunga, Mumbai, MS, India

Abstract

A significant voice of her generation, the poetry of Kamala Das epitomizes a break from the past as she writes in a completely different pattern which not only touches the heart of her readers but also infuses pain, passion and poison in them. Her confrontational poems are known for their courageously genuine searches and discoveries of the self and various such interrogations related to female sexuality, metropolitan life, role of women in traditional Indian society, post-colonial identity, and many more challenging concepts of life.

Keywords: feminist, traditional, adulthood, womanhood, sexuality, post-colonial, identity

Kamala Das, the name speaks itself – this bold and beautiful writer has brought about the commemoration of art and justice in such a commendable way that it has illuminated and ignited the essence of righteousness and liberation. Hard core feminism peeps in from every syllable she utters. It is not out of fashion she writes feministic poetry it is compulsion that forces her to ignite the flame of revolt and reaction. Women suffer throughout and she as a woman feels the pain of it. She wants every woman to break the physical and emotional shackles and face the challenges of their lives openly. Womanhood is not a curse; womanhood is love, womanhood is power, womanhood is achievement. To her womanhood involves innumerable experiences but with astonishment she realizes that Indian women are ashamed of expressing their incidents in society. Shame is not what women should adhere to for it is a silent killer; courageous should she be just for the sake of life.

India has always had great women poets, but they have traditionally been undervalued throughout and the reason may be the patriarchal postulations of the dominating other half. Earlier women restricted their writings to the enclosed domestic world which were at times carved with the perceptions and experiences felt within the four walls and so their writing was considered prejudiced as well as below standard. Today the Indian woman desperately tries to break every manacle, and she revolts to submit to the call of the male dominated society. She has come out from darkness to light, from submissive fear to explosive boldness, from hidden insecurity to utmost courage. And Kamala Das, with her aspiring poetry, has not only impressed but also instigated the urge to lead a life filled with ‘kindly light’.

The poetry of Kamala Das has created havoc in the Indian traditional society. Considered as a significant voice of her generation, she epitomizes a break from the past by writing in a completely different pattern which not only touches the heart of her readers but also infuses pain, passion and poison in them. Her confrontational poems are known for their audaciously sincere explorations of the self as well as female sexuality, metropolitan life, role of women in traditional Indian society, questions related to post-colonial identity, etc.

Kamala Das with her distinctive writing has given Indian poetry in English a different dimension by infusing feminist facet to it, although she hardly admits it. Developing her stimulation from her matrilineal background, she commemorates a woman's body and appeals for its veracity in her poems. Her poetry is the poetry of every woman – no man can venture it – her cry is the pain of every woman – no man can feel it – her revolt is the power of every woman – no man can experience it ----- and here lies her ascetic feminism.

In her long journey as a writer, she has created many a ripple and the current has pulled her into the deep sea. Combining her personal life with her poetry she has revealed facts that remain concealed in the heart of every woman who is unable to find a path out. Taking shelter into poetry, she attacks the male-dominated chauvinistic society with her sharp piercing words and indomitable straight-forward approach. Coming from a conservative Hindu family, she shocked the entire community with the publication of her autobiography "My Story" where she reveals about her sexual desires and adventures. Das's weird honesty expands to her the exploration of womanhood and desperate love. Das consistently disclaims admitting the silence of women and she protests on behalf of them so that they are capable of treading through the same path without any panic or regret. Feelings of yearning and defeat should never be confined to private misery only; they should be acknowledged in the public sphere as well.

Kamala Das even illustrates religious and domestic imagery to explore a sense of identity and without any second thought reveals extremely personal experiences, including her growth into adulthood as well as her unsuccessful quest for love. Her first poetry collection *Summer in Calcutta* promised the rise of a revolutionary woman poet in India. She became a controversial figure after the publication of the collection of poems and was criticized for anomalous imagery and frankness. She knows how painful it is to expose a woman, but she also understands that if not represented the veil of suffering will never be lifted. In poems like 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' and 'The Freaks' it is sexuality and pursuit for accomplishment that is her main concern. To choose a subject as the 'eunuchs' is like accepting challenge without any hesitation and to present their abominable situation is concern and commitment beyond description. How wonderfully has she presented the real picture that usually goes unnoticed and how beautifully has she infused pathos to the life that matters nothing at all:

*Even the crows were so
Silent on trees, and the children wide-eyed still;
All were watching these poor creatures' convulsions [The Dance of the Eunuchs]*

What is the reason behind Das's affinity to that particular class which hardly finds any place in the social order? The eunuchs dress themselves like women, and is not this -- the reason behind Das's being drawn towards them? Isn't she sarcastically pointing out the humiliation that lies hidden behind the dress? Dress like a woman and you suffer, decorate yourself like a woman and you snivel, behave like a woman and you submit.

In 'An Introduction' the traditionally confidential experiences are made public by her, and she suggests that the personal feelings of desire and defeat are actually a combined prevalence of womanhood. A girl has either to accept or to adjust and if she fails to do so she is a rebel. The poem is a replica of her attitude and her aggressiveness, her revolt and her revelation. She places herself at the centre of the

poem which is about her as well as reflects 'every man' and 'every woman'. The poem swings from one temper to another, from one orb of life to a different and through these fluctuations she comes forward as someone whose universality is marked by the individuality that smears her 'self'.

Kamala Das's works challenge every Western elucidation of the Eastern woman. Her extremely individual and confessional poetry surveys male-female relationship in the context of sexual immigration of women in their native society. Her poetry can be interpreted as an example of Indian feminist contemplation – the consequences and the construal. Her poetry challenges the stereotype Indian women and the power disparity between the sexes. There is restlessness in her poetry along with the restrains of femininity. She rejects the traditional female icon and rebels against the overpowering Indian male ego:

*Be a wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh,
Belong [An Introduction]*

In the collection *The Descendants* the poem 'The Maggots' encloses the sting of lost love along with ancient Hindu myths whereas the poem 'The Looking Glass' implies that most of the things that society brands to be forbidden are the things that women are supposed to provide. The poems like 'Substitute', 'Gino' and 'The Suicide' that belong to the collection *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* relate the failure of physical love to afford ultimate fulfillment, escape from the self and exorcism of the past. Das often uses traditional religious imagery to sustain and exalt herself. She claims to search for an incarnation of the god Krishna in her love affairs and worships the god when the genuine men turn out to have faults. Why does she rely so much on the power of God? Is it that she knows there is no other hope for a woman other than God? Or is it with sarcasm she exposes god's own creation? Whatever may be her intention, it is finally her dissatisfaction that speaks throughout the poems. Women are tormented and tortured beyond limits and she as a woman finds faults with the dominating sex and thus by portraying them in her poetry takes revenge in a different way.

Kamala Das's poetry echoes the need for change in the traditional Indian outlook of women and for breaking the concept of 'the long-suffering other'. This Indian English woman poetess has created a benchmark for every other contemporary woman poet to come forward with problems and solutions that can be penned down without any hitch or constraint. A writer should be free enough to express her/his views – it is not a sin to share the misfortunes that women undergo every day. The tragedy that is felt by them constantly can be lessened by making it known to all. Situations are such that a traditional Indian woman is incapable to convey but that does not mean that it should not be taken into grant at all. The sting and the venom that is inculcated in every woman should be voiced by those who know how to express it and Kamala Das is one such poet who shares the vehemence and the anguish of every woman. The inner felt pain of a woman finds shelter in her heart and articulates expression through the power of her pen. She is confident of answering every tormented soul, she knows how to justify love and life together, and she acknowledges the price that every woman has to pay just for the sake of being a woman:

*Ask me why life is short and love is
Shorter still, ask me what is bliss and what its price..... [The Stone Age]*

All through she has been in search of bliss, like any other woman, and incessantly she speaks of failed love and dejected feelings. Have women come to the world just to serve and suffer? This is the question that haunts her throughout creating dejection and pain, subjugation and revolt. She satisfies her feministic quest for freedom by exploring the deep delves of her passionate heart and expressing them through audacious poetry.

Works consulted:

1. Kamala Das: *The Descendants*, 1967, Writers Workshop, ISBN: 8171892388
2. Kamala Das: *Summer in Calcutta*, 1965, DC Books, ISBN: 8126409193.
3. Kamala Das: *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, 1973, Orient Longman, ISBN: 8125026436.
4. Godhak V.K. (ed.) *The Golden Treasury of Indo- Anglian Poetry*: Sahitya Academi, New Delhi, 1992
5. A.N. Dwivedi, *Kamala Das and Her Poetry*. Atlantic Pub., New Delhi, 2006,