Abstract

Women all over the world have been treated as the ‘other’ by the Patriarchal social order. The paper focuses on personal writing of Kamala Dass and hears her voice from within. It can be done through a selected poems authored by poetess herself.

Kamala Das is one of the most significant voices of Indian English poetry. As a women poet her confessional self deals with her personal emotional experiences which are generally taboo. The poetess does not expect any redemption or retribution as there is no remorse. It is just, that she bare her soul to get a psychic relief. What a confessional poet gives us is the psychological equivalent for his or her mental state, and it is such ‘psychological equivalents’ that we always get in the poetry of Kamala Das, and in this respect she is to be compared to such confessional poets as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Roetke, Berry-man, Judith Wright and others. She won a number of awards like Asian Poetry Prize1998, Sahitya Academy Award 2003, Vayalar Award 2001, Kerala Sahitya Academy etc etc. Her own predicament and her own suffering become symbolic of human predicament and human suffering. In a male dominated world, she tried to assert her individuality, to maintain her feminine identity, and from this revolt arose all her troubles, psychological traumas and frustrations. It is a kind of psychological striptease that she enacts in her poetry.

Several questions need to be asked while reading her confessional mode. For example, what are the contexts in which women write their personal experiences? How are their writings different from men’s point of view? How do they negotiate their self with
Society? Who are their imagined readers? These and several other issues will be dealt in the paper through a close reading of Kamala Das Poetry.

The paper focuses on personal writing of Kamala Das and hears her voice from within. It can be done through a selected poems authored by poetess herself. Kamala Das is one of the most significant voices of Indian English poetry. As a women poet her confessional self deals with her personal emotional experiences which are generally taboo. The poetess does not expect any redemption or retribution as there is no remorse. It is just, that she bare her soul to get a psychic relief. What a confessional poet gives us is the psychological equivalent for his or her mental state, and it is such ‘psychological equivalents’ that we always get in the poetry of Kamala Das, and in this respect she is to be compared to such confessional poets as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Rosette, Berry-man, Judith Wright and others.

E.V. Ramakrishnan rightly stresses that, in her poetry, Kamala, “has always death with private humiliations and sufferings which are the stock themes of confessional poetry the crucial factor in all confessional poetry is a matter of tone. The free verse of Kamala Das, by crucially avoiding clichés of expression, has treating the most intimate experience without ever being sentimental or having any trace of pathos. Her frank admissions and bold treatment of private life have nothing exceptional about them and are perfectly keeping with the nature and themes of confessional poetry. Her repeated references to her Nair heritage of confessional Dravidian skin are part of a persistent attempt to define her identity. As a creator of a personal mythology, redefining of one’s identity, form a major concern of the confessional poet.”

Kamala Das is concerned with herself as victim, sexual humiliation becomes a central experience in her auto-biography ‘My Story’ in which she says: “In the orbit of illicit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence.”

Confessional poetry is struggled to relate the private experience with the outer world as it is. Such a struggle is in evidence in the poems of Kamala Das from a very early stage. In “An Introduction” she struggles to keep her identity against “the categorized” who ask her to “fit in”. Having refused to choose a name and a role she refused to choose a name and a role she fells it necessary to define her identity:
I am saint. I am the beloved and the betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I ………………

The painful assertion, “such a struggle is in evidence in the poems from the predicament of the confessional poet. Her experiences are common and ordinary, in fact too common to give her any special identity. But the “I” which experiences them, she insists, is separate and unique. This, to her, is the only way to retain her sense of personal worth in the world of categorizers. She sees the outer as hostile to the world of the self. This hostility is given full treatment in her “The Suicide”, which, with its title, poetic mood, and theme, carries the most vital elements of confessional poetry. Here the conflict is between the world as it is and the personal experiences of the poet given in terms of the symbols of the body and the soul. The poem is a monologue addressed to the Sea: since the poet cannot disinherit either the body or the soul and live with one of them, the climax of the poem is reached in the idea of suicide where the agency which can take away one of them is the sea, an old symbol of timelessness. The poet cannot synthesize the inner and the outer, i.e. the soul and body, and so she thinks of death:

\[ O \text{ sea, I am fed up} \]
\[ I \text{ want to be simple} \]
\[ I \text{ want to be loved} \]
\[ \text{AND} \]
\[ \text{If love is not to be had} \]
\[ I \text{ want to be dead, just dead.} \]

Confessional poetry is all autobiographical; it is rooted in the personal experiences of the poetess. T.S. Eliot stressed the impersonality of poetry, but confessional poetry is intensely personal. However, a great confessional poet, like Kamala Das, achieves impersonality in another way. From the personal and the particular, she rises to the general and the universal. Her own predicament and her own suffering become symbolic of human predicament and human suffering. Herein lies Kamala’s greatness as an artist. She is both intensely personal and universal.
Her poetry is self centered and unabashedly sexual although the sexuality seems more fascinating to the poet because it is hers than because it is sexual”. She speaks of her sexual experiences in a tone that “you cannot believe darling”, which are both self-indulgent and truculent:

*Ask me, everybody, ask me,*

*What he sees in me, ask me why he is*

*Called a lion”.*

Kamala’s Confessional poems show that she is ‘every woman who seeks love’. She is ‘the beloved and the betrayed’, expressing her ‘endless female hunger’, ‘the muted whisper at the core of womanhood’. A Confessional poet often writes about death, disease and destruction. Kamala Das also has written quite a few poems on decay, disease and death.

Although a Confessional poet—that Kamala Das is—can make use of any subject for her treatment, she mostly confines herself to the regions of her own experiences. She hardly ever writes about ‘old, unhappy, far-off things’, as Wordsworth and his band of followers did. That is why Confessional poetry sounds so appealing and so convincing. It is frequently takes resort to personal failures and mental illness of its composer and Kamala’s verse is a brilliant illustration of it. In My Grandmother’s House, the following lines click:

“…………………………I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers’ doors to
Receive love, at least in small change”.

In ‘Love’ she distrusts the very medium of Poetry and laments its artificiality:

*Until I found you,*

*I wrote verse, drew pictures,*
And, went out with friends
For walks…
Now that I love you,
Curled like an old mongrel
My life lies, content,
In you….
(From Summer in Calcutta)

In poems such as “The Dance of the Eunuchs” and “The Freaks,” Das draws upon the exotic to discuss her sexuality and her quest for fulfillment.

Lovers dying and or children left unborn….
Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry breasts
And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy. They
Were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt logs from
Funeral pyres, a drought and rottenness
Were in each of them. (“The Dance of the Eunuchs”).

. In “An Introduction,” Das makes public traditionally private experiences, suggesting that women's personal feelings of longing and loss are part of the collective experience of womanhood.

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? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness’s
All mine, mine alone.
It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human.

What we see in the poetry of Kamala Das must be viewed in the light of her feminine consciousness. She acquired these circumstances dependent upon the society of her childhood days. As a poet, she is conscious of her creative faculties and tries to break chains and restraints. She indulges in self-awareness, self-exploration and self introspection in order to define herself poetically.

She finds herself condemned to play the part, apart from her feminine self. It is the male society, which compels her to choose her roles according to their convenience. She is forced to act either as a slave or an idol. Her personality reflects [he-worse condition of woman. She writes in My Story:
"Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself; o gets rid of my loneliness which is not unique in any way b-u: is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements".

Her feminine self is an example of the cruelty, tyranny and indifferent attitude of man. She is subjected to much humiliation by her own husband as well as by other men. The sex-based aspects of her observations about men are more-complexive where bed is no more a place that can offer a woman comfortable sleep. She loses her feminine identity when she is forced on to the bed against her desires. She mourns:
"They let her slide from
pegs of sanity into
A bed made soft with
tears and
She lay there weeping
far sleep had lost its use ..."
But her feminine self in order to escape from the suffering and humiliation, can only build a wall of tears :.
"...I shall build walls with tears
She said, walls to shu: me in .
In her famous poem 'The Freaks', Kamala Das talks about the disgust relationship of a husband and wife. In this poem she concludes about the base of the husband-wife relationships in the following lines:

"But, they only wander,
tripping Idly over puddles of Desire
...can't this man with Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the Skin's lazy hungers?"

Here she has the view that only physical relation cannot give a perfect touch to a man-woman i.e. a husband-wife relationship. She asks:
Who can Help us who have lived so long
And have failed in love?"

Meaning is that love is necessary to build a healthy and long lasting relationship between anyone. Only physical relationship is not able to bind the two persons.

In her another poem 'The Sunshine Cat', she also talks about the same kind of loveless relationship of the man and woman. She complains:

"... the man she loved who loved her not enough...
the husband who neither loved nor used her"

and concludes the fate of this loveless bond of man - woman relationship in the following way: "a bed made soft with tears and she lay there weeping".

Hence, in the poetry of Kamala Das, she strongly recommends that the presence of love is necessary to make any kind of healthy and long lasting relationship between man and woman. Whether it is a bond of husband and wife or lover and beloved or it is bond of mother and son, all types of man-woman relationship can be made only by a bond of love.
Kamala Das articulates the despair and longing of fellow women through her writings. She protests against the oppression of the female class and wants to emancipate woman from the stereotypes of her colonized status. The poetic work of Kamala Das has engaged considerable critical attention and sustained rigorous explication. The subject of Kamala's work comprises of “woman” and the revelation of female experiences, be it trauma of an unhappy marriage or humiliation of a desireless surrender in sex or disgust at the male domination. Quest for love is certainly the perennial theme of Kamala's poetry. The poet studies love from many angles, and her treatment of the theme is characterized by increasing depth and intensity (Tilak 2009 p.106). According to the poet, love, for a woman is much more than what it is for a man. The difference in experience of love for the two is well put by Kamala:

......*In him.....the hungry haste
Of rivers, in me..... the oceans' tireless
Waiting.* (An Introduction)

To conclude, Kamala Das is a typical Confessional poet who pours her heart into her poetry which is largely subjective and autobiographical, anguished and tortured, letting us peep into her sufferings and tortured psyche. Thanks to her that a reliable poetic voice has been heard in contemporary Indo-English verse at long last. Dwivedi remarks “there is a strong autobiographical touch in it, which makes Mrs. Das a Confessional poet of the first order.”