

Radical Voices in Indian English Poetry: A Study of the Poetry of Kamala Das

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Abstract

The creative genius of Kamala Das, one of the most prominent voices of protest in Indian English Literature is often compared to the American poet Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton as both of them used the confessional mode of writing in their poetry. Kamala Das, born in 1934 in Thrissur district of Kerala emerged as a distinctive poetic voice with the publication of the first volume of her poetry *Summer in Calcutta*. In her poems Kamala Das has always raised a voice against the conventionalized figure of a woman, seeking a more dignified and honourable position for woman as an entity. In fact her poetry addresses the most critical issue in the contemporary society-the need to awaken the women. Her poetry collections include- *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other*

poems (1973), *Tonight, This Savage Rite* (1979), *The Collected Poems* (1984). *My Story* published in 1976 is her autobiography.

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When the first volume of poetry of Kamala Das, *Summer in Calcutta* was published in 1965, the feminist movement was at its pick. Feminism is a movement against the discrimination of women on the basis of gender. In the west the origin of the feminist thinking can be traced long back in 1792 when Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. The book succeeded in drawing public attention to the condition of women in contemporary society. However the official inauguration of the women's movement took place with the Seneca Falls Convention in America in 1848. The feminist movement can broadly be classified into first and second wave of feminism. While the first wave feminists dealt with the inequalities between men and women; the second wave feminists are concerned with the oppression of women in the patriarchal world. During the 1960s the second wave of feminism was at its pick and they raised voice against the oppression of women.

Feminism rejects the assertion that creative mind is sexless. Men may try to write about women but it is only women who can better voice the problems faced by them in patriarchal society. The experience of womanhood gives woman a distinct mode of perception which is totally different from man. The gynocritics even assert that there exists an 'écriture feminine' i.e. distinctive women's language. In women's literature the female self is identical to the female body. In this perspective the poems of Kamala Das can be viewed as radical in Indian context as they openly unveil the female psyche.

The Indian Poetry in English is said to have begun with Henry Louis Vivin Derozio, whose poetry delineated Indian situation. His interest in India is clearly visible in his poem

Harp of India. The tradition of writing Indian poetry in English was further carried on by Sri Aurobindo, Sorojini Naidu, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt and Rabindra Nath Tagore who wrote both in Bengali and English and translated his Bengali poems into English himself. After independence in the 1960s Indian English poetry acquired a new character and a distinctive voice with the rise of poets like Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, A. K. Mehrotra, Kamala Das etc. most of these poets have won great acclamation both India and abroad.

In the post independence era Indian women's writing in English revealed the feminine psyche that hitherto remained unknown. Women writers began to express in their writing their anger against the social situation in which they were living. Among all the women writers Kamala Das is perhaps the most controversial figure in the realm of Indian English poetry. Her poetic temper made her a new phenomenon in the Indian English Poetry, as K. R. S. Iyengar says, "a far cry indeed from Toru Dutt or even Sorijini Naidu"(Iyengar1992:680). Toru Dutt and Sorjini Naidu represent the romantic tradition in Indian English poetry and Kamala Das makes a distinctive shift from this tradition. Her poetic sensibility is filled with agonies of feminine existence that have turned out to be violent poetic outcry.

The proposed study is an attempt to show the radical voice of Kamala Das in her poems against the institution of marriage. In a conventional patriarchal society a woman suffers most in her marital relationship. Torn between the lust of her husband and the conventional social norms the wife gradually accepts situation to be her destiny. The study is based on two widely acclaimed poems of Kamala Das- *An Introduction* and *The Old Playhouse*. The paper employs key ideas drawn from feminism that would provide the broader framework for the present study. The present study follows the interpretative analysis of the primary text and the investigation would mainly rely on secondary sources available.

In her poems Kamala Das has voiced her anger and reaction against the patriarchal superiority and dominance that ultimately results in marginalization of women in their social, cultural and family relationship. Her poetry is an honest exploration of the self and female sexuality. She delves deep into the female psyche in relation to her urban existence, gender roles attributed to woman by society, marital life and personal struggle of marginalized women.

In the poem *An Introduction* the poet introduces herself as a 'brown woman'. In the black/white binary structure the 'white' enjoys a privileged position and it makes the readers aware that the poet is not a 'fair woman' who enjoys a better prospect of marriage. Kamala Das feels contempt for the male lust that exploits woman within marriage. She views herself as an object of her husband's sexual gratification, who is always in a hurry to take her body in full possession. As marriage has given her husband the formal permission to use his wife's body, he never cares to understand her:

"He did not beat me

But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.

The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.

I shrank pitifully." (*An Introduction*)

She is extremely critical of the male insincerity and indifference towards the urge of the woman. For Kamala Das her husband is also no exception to this:

"He is every man

Who wants, a woman, just as I am every

Woman who seeks love. In him....the hungry haste

Of rivers, in me...the oceans' tireless

Waiting." (*An Introduction*)

As a confessional poet Kamala Das reveals her personal world to her readers-her early marriage that turned out to be a relation devoid of love and her search for love in relationships outside marriage. So the self in the poems of Kamala Das is a frustrated woman in love-both inside and outside marriage. As she expresses:

“It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,
It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am beloved and betrayed.” (*An Introduction*)

Kamala Das was married to a bank employee at the age of fifteen, when she did not even know what marriage demands of an Indian woman. Her marriage turned out to be a loveless relationship where the woman receives violent sexual assaults. As she expresses:

“I was child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. When
I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
But my sad woman felt so beaten.” (*An Introduction*)

Kamala Das is a revolutionary poet. Her poems are the best expressions of feminine sensibility. In K. R. S. Iyengar’s words, “Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate that the hurts she has received in an insensitive largely man-made world” (Iyengar 1992:680). Kamala Das’s hatred towards the institution of marriage developed in her childhood as she witnessed the loveless relationship of her parents.

In her autobiography *My Story* Kamala Das remarked that her parents were 'horribly mismatched'. And when she got married at the age of fifteen, her own marriage turned out to be equally mismatched. In the poem *My Grandmother's House*, Kamala Das reflects on her childhood days spent in the company of her grandmother. Her grandmother's love for her gave her a sense of security which was absent in her married life. Her childhood days were full of freedom and she regrets it when she compares it to her married life. In her poems Kamala Das has projected her married life as the ugliest phase of her life- full of sorrow and frustration. Kamala Das uses the symbol of a sparrow to compare her childhood days to that of her married life. During her childhood, she was like a sparrow, a free bird. But after marriage she is a captive in the hands of her husband as if the sparrow has been domesticated and her wings have been cut off. In the *Old Playhouse* Kamala Das shows her desire for freedom from the restrictions that marriage has imposed on her and candidly opposes the traditional gender roles society has imposed on women:

"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." (*The Old Playhouse*)

In the poems *An Introduction* and *The Old Playhouse* Kamala Das has denounced the role of woman as a traditional wife. In the confessional mode Kamala Das has explored the gender roles played by an Indian wife during her life time. She hated the institution of marriage as it gives the man permission to the female body in whatever way he likes. For her, marriage is a game of cruelty where the relationship between the man and the woman is that of the victimizer and the victim. To remain confined inside the boundaries of an unhappy

marriage is extremely suffocative for Kamala Das. She raises her voice against the chasm between the masculine and feminine world:

“...Your room is
Always lit by artificial light, your windows always
Shut. Even the air-conditioner helps so little,
All pervasive is the male scent of your breath.” (*The Old Playhouse*)

Kamala Das loves freedom and her obsession with a desire for freedom makes her rebel against marriage. For her, marriage brings an end to all possibilities of freedom for woman as it is a process of dissolving in the male world where the woman has to internalize the ‘joys’ and ‘aches’ of her husband:

“I have no joys that are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours.” (*An Introduction*)

Kamala Das’s love for freedom is also evident in the opening lines of the poem *The Old Playhouse* when she uses the word ‘swallow’. Her husband plans to tame her with the ‘summer of his love’ so that she forgets not only ‘the raw seasons’, her ‘homes left behind’ but also the very nature which gives her an identity as an individual:

“You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her
In the long summer of your love so that she would forget
Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but
Also her nature,” (*The Old Playhouse*)

Within the institution of marriage a woman has to live a life of complete surrender and passivity. But Kamala Das is not at all ready to submit herself to this situation as submission means negation of her identity as an individual. She wants to come out of the cocoon of false love and ‘tired lust’

“I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon

You built around me with morning tea,
Love words flung from doorways and of course
Your tired lust..." (*I Shall One Day*)

In the light of the above discussion we can conclude that Kamala Das's poems can be seen as a radical voice in the contemporary context as they convey a protest against the ways society have treated Indian woman. As a confessional poet Kamala Das no doubt expresses her personal experiences, but these personal experiences have a universal appeal as they represent the plight of common marginalized women of India. Kamala Das is against exploitation of women and in her poems *An Introduction* and *The Old Playhouse* she raises her voice against the institution of marriage that exploits both the mind and body of women. In her voice of protest there is also a glimpse of her desire to escape her 'womanliness' by wearing a shirt and trousers. She is not ready to accept and submit to the fixed pattern of a woman's life which is fixed by the society for her. Thus by raising a voice of protest against the conventional patriarchal society Kamala Das intends to instill courage in the hearts of the fellow women to set themselves free from societal bondage.

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