

Review

WOMEN BY THE WOMAN – A Study about the great legend Kamala Das

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Kamala Suraiya (also known as Kamala Das or Madhavikutty) had made it clear to readers, critics and family that she did not want to be “categorized” and that’s just the way it was. Das’s poetry flung open its doors to let in topics that women had kept decorously out: the boredom of marriage, the thrills of love, the pains of being a woman, of being a writer, the loneliness of being unloved, the joy of being in love.

“An Introduction” is the first and the most famous poem in the confessional mode. She begins by self assertion but later she remarks various situations, where she was down trodden. The poet, an individual woman then tries to voice a universal womanhood trying to share her experiences, good or bad with all other women. Love and sexuality are a strong component in her search for female identity.

Key words: The poet, Love and sexuality, female identity

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das was an exemplary new woman in many ways. She was bold, uninhibited, full of creative energy that she sustained to the very end as is proven by her last few poems in *Closure*, and secular enough to try another religion in the last days of life...Her burial in a mosque was a great lesson to those with insular minds.

Malayalam poet and bilingual critic K. Sachidanandan(1996).

Writing according to Kamala Das is a sort of spiritual therapy. She says “If I had been a loved person. I would not have become a writer. I would have been a happy human being” (Das, 2008).

Das's poetry has been intimately connected to critical perception of her personality and politics; her provocative poetry has seldom produced lukewarm reactions. While

reviewers of Das's early poetry have praised its fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice, they lamented that it lacked attention to structure and craftsmanship. Many critics have analyzed Das as a “confessional” poet, writing in the tradition of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Denise Levertov.

Kamala Das begins by self-assertion: I am what I am. The poetess claims that she is not interested in politics, but claims to know the names of all in power beginning from Nehru. She seems to state that these are involuntarily ingrained in her. By challenging us that she can repeat these as easily as days of the week, or the names of months she echoes that these politicians were caught in a repetitive cycle of time, irrespective of any individuality. They did not define time; rather time defined them (Warrier, 1996).

Subsequently, she comes down to her roots. She

declares that by default she is an Indian. Other considerations follow this factor. She says that she is 'born in' Malabar; she does not say that she belongs to Malabar. She is far from regional prejudices. She first defines herself in terms of her nationality, and second by her colour.

I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,

And she is very proud to exclaim that she is 'very brown'. She goes on to articulate that she speaks in three languages, writes in two and dreams in one; as though dreams require a medium. Kamala Das echoes that the medium is not as significant as is the comfort level that one requires. The essence of one's thinking is the prerequisite to writing. Hence she implores with all "critics, friends, visiting cousins" to leave her alone. Kamala Das reflects the main theme of Girish Karnad's "Broken Images"-the conflict between writing in one's regional language and utilizing a foreign language. The language that she speaks is essentially hers; the primary ideas are not a reflection but an individual impression. It is the distortions and queerness that makes it individual. And it is these imperfections that render it human. It is the language of her expression and emotion as it voices her joys, sorrows and hopes. It comes to her as cawing comes to the crows and roaring to the lions, and is therefore impulsive and instinctive. It is not the deaf, blind speech: though it has its own defects, it cannot be seen as her handicap. It is not unpredictable like the trees on storm or the clouds of rain. Neither does it echo the "incoherent mutterings of the blazing fire." It possesses a coherence of its own: an emotional coherence.

She was child-like or innocent; and she knew she grew up only because according to others her size had grown. The emotional frame of mind was essentially the same. Married at the early age of sixteen, her husband confined her to a single room. She was ashamed of her femininity that came before time, and brought her to this predicament. This explains her claim that she was crushed by the weight of her breast and womb. She tries to overcome it by seeming tomboyish. So she cuts her hair short and adorns boyish clothes. People criticize her and tell her to 'conform' to the various womanly roles. They accuse her of being schizophrenic; and 'a nympho'. They confuse her want of love and attention for insatiable sexual craving.

As the girl seeks fulfilment of her adolescent passion, a young lover is forced upon her to traumatize and coerce the female-body since the same is the site for patriarchy to display its power and authority. When thereafter, she opts for male clothing to hide her femininity, the guardians enforce typical female attire, with warnings to fit into the socially determined attributes of a woman, to become a wife and a mother and get confined to the

domestic routine. She is threatened to remain within the four walls of her female space lest she should make herself a psychic or a maniac.

But the poet is an individual woman trying to voice a universal womanhood and trying to share her experiences, good or bad, with all other women. Love and sexuality are a strong component in her search for female identity and the identity consists of polarities.

She explains her encounter with a man. She attributes him with not a proper noun, but a common noun-"every man" to reflect his universality. He defined himself by the "I", the supreme male ego. He is tightly compartmentalized as "the sword in its sheath". It portrays the power politics of the patriarchal society that we thrive in that is all about control. It is this "I" that stays long away without any restrictions, is free to laugh at his own will, succumbs to a woman only out of lust and later feels ashamed of his own weakness that lets himself lose to a woman. Towards the end of the poem, a role-reversal occurs as this "I" gradually transitions to the poetess herself. She pronounces how this "I" is also sinner and saint", beloved and betrayed. As the role-reversal occurs, the woman too becomes the "I" reaching the pinnacle of self-assertion.

" I have no joys that are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I"

These lines depict the heavy emotions of a human being, the poet wants to be treated equal and that she is no less than 'man' in holding responsibilities. Also, get to know the sense of 'identity crisis' being portrayed. The very word 'I' which is referred to someone who can take a firm stand in the society and someone who can make decisions and enjoy freedom; and 'I' in this context is referred to a man, but Das contradicts this and substantiates by calling herself as 'I', as someone who should be respected.

Das once said, "I always wanted love, and if you don't get it within your home, you stray a little"(Warrior interview). Though some might label Das as "a feminist" for her candor in dealing with women's needs and desires, Das "has never tried to identify herself with any particular version of feminist activism". Das' views can be characterized as "a gut response," a reaction that, like her poetry, is unfettered by other's notions of right and wrong. Nonetheless, poet Eunice de Souza claims that Das has "mapped out the terrain for post-colonial women in social and linguistic terms".

There is no doubt Kamala Das is a new phenomenon in Indo-Anglian poetry—a far cry indeed from Toru Dutt or even Sarojini Naidu. Kamala Das's is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world . . . Das has ventured into areas unclaimed by society and provided a point of reference for her

colleagues. She has transcended the role of a poet and simply embraced the role of a very honest woman.

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