



THE CRY OF A CAGED BIRD STRUGGLING TO BREAK FREE: REFLECTIONS ON KAMALA DAS'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Kamala Das is one of the most distinctive and original of Indian poets writing in English. Her poetic output is very slender and comprises only three volumes of poetry, but some of her poems are remarkable to find her an honourable place in Indian Writing in English. She is one of the members of the poetic trinity of Indo-Anglian poets, the other two being Nissim Ezekiel and Ramanujan. Kamala Das's experiences were limited and also is her range. But like Jane Austen, she recognised the limitations of her range and achieved excellence by working on her "three inches of ivory". As a poetess she lays bare her soul with openness and frankness. Her poetry is confessional and autobiographical. As she herself has put it "I must let my mind striptease/ I must extrude autobiography". This article highlights the confessional tone as revealed in Kamala Das's poetry.

Key Words: Confession, humiliation, identity, frankness, self, psychological trauma

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Kamala Das (1934-2009) is a pioneer of post-independence Indian English poetry. She is one of the members of the poetic unity of Indo-Anglian poets, the other two being Nissim Ezekiel and Ramanujan. Her successive books of verse include *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *Collected Poems Vol I* (1984), *The Best of Kamala Das* (1991), *Anamalai Poems* (1992), and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996). She won the Sahitya Academi Award for *Collected Poems Vol I* for the year 1985. Extreme sincerity and integrity are the hallmarks of her poetry; she speaks out of her love-longings, frustrations and disillusionments with a disarming frankness. Her poetry which is remarkable for confessional tone is mostly revealed in her autobiography, *My Story* (1976). It shows that 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.

Confessional poetry is autobiographical. Kamala Das's poetry reveals her experiences, her anguishes and her frustrations. It is a mirror of her like. As a confessional poet Kamala Das always deals with private humiliations and sufferings like confessional poets who deal in their poetry with personal emotional experiences which are generally taboo. There is ruthless self-analysis and a tone of utter sincerity. The facts are not always true, but there is no deviation at all from emotional truth. What a confessional poet gives us is the psychological equivalent for his or her mental state, and it is such 'psychological equivalents' that are significant in the poetry of Kamala Das, and in this

respect she is similar to such confessional poets as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Roethke, Berryman, Judith Wright and others. E. V. Ramakrishna rightly stresses that, in her poetry, Kamala,

has always dealt with private humiliations and sufferings which are the sock themes of confessional poetry. The crucial factor in all confessional poetry is a matter of tone. The free verse of Kamala Das, by carefully avoiding all clichés of expression, has perfected a way of treating the most intimate experience without ever being sentimental or having any trace of pathos. Indian critics have found in her poems the voice of the new liberated Indian woman without realizing that she never speaks on behalf of anybody but herself, let alone any class or section of Indian society. Her frank admissions and bold treatment of private life have nothing exceptional about them and are perfectly in keeping with the nature and themes of confessional poetry. As creator of a personal mythology, redefining of one's identity, forms a major concern of the confessional poet.

Kamala Das herself admits that she is a victim. Sexual humiliation becomes a central experience in her auto-biography *My Story* (1976) in which she says, "In the orbit of illicit sex, there seemed to be only crudeness and violence." *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) is a variation on the same theme: "You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured/yourself into every nook and cranny, You embalmed/My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices". All her quests for love end in disasters of lust. The sterility and the vacant ecstasy that accompany *The Dance of the Eunuchs*, included in the collection *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), correspond to her own feeling of persecution and inadequacy which live in her as a continuous state of personal crisis. Shiv K. Kumar, the well-known poet and critic observes,

It seems that the past two decades or so have witnessed an unprecedented upsurge of longing for freedom in our women's outlook they have not only claimed parity

with men but have vehemently questioned certain age-old social practices and prejudices. This is the predominant theme in Kamala Das's poetry which exposes male chauvinism, its persistent endeavour to play the role of the 'stronger' sex. No wonder, the contemporary woman-writer is never tired of articulating her disgust for the insensitive, aggressive male. If there is, therefore, a recurring element of sex in her work, it is more to expose it as a form of male dominance than to glorify it. All that Kamala Das is trying to do is to salvage the Indian woman from the sexual exploitation of man, her husband or lover.

Kamala Das struggles to relate the private experience with the outer world as it is and it is evident in her poems from a very early stage. In *An Introduction*, perhaps the most famous of the poems written by Kamala Das in a self-reflective and confessional tone from her maiden publication *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), she struggles to keep her identity against "the categorizers" who ask her to "fit in". Having refused to choose a name and a role she feels 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..... (Summer in Calcutta 62-63)

The image of the body as a prison which recurs in her poems reveals this deep existential anxiety that pervades all confessional poetry. Her emphasis on the satisfaction of the body finds support in the work of Queer theorist, Judith Butler, who maintains that it is the body that determines one's nature and character. Our fate lies not in the stars but in the body. Betrayal in love breaks the heart of the poet. In order to save the love relationship, she advises woman to gift all to men in a poem called, *The Looking Glass*:

Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent
of Long hair, the must of sweat between
the breasts The warm shock of menstrual
blood, and all your Endless female hungers
(The Descendants 25)

Her poem, *The Suicide* presents the conflict between the world as it is and the personal experience of the poet given in terms of the symbols of the body and soul. The poem is in the form of a monologue addressed to the sea which stands as an old symbol of eternity. The poet cannot disown either the body or the soul and live with one of them. So she prefers the idea of suicide where the agency which can take away one of them is the sea. The poet is unable to synchronise the inner and the outer, i.e. the soul and body. The poet reminds us of John Donne's *Aire and Angels* in which the latter lays emphasis on body. Das begins her poem playing on the dichotomy between the body and the soul:

Bereft of soul
My body shall be bare
Bereft of body
My soul shall be bare....
If love is not to be hand
I want to be dead, just dead (The Descendants 1).

Vindra Nabar draws a comparison between Kamala Das and Sylvia Plath as confessional poets. She writes,

A comparison with Sylvia Plath at this point may be relevant. No matter how much is written about confessions, all her critics agreed that she transforms them into her poetry of the most extraordinary complexity and variety. It is ultimately the poetry that matters, with all its direct and metaphorical implications.

In Kamala, on the other hand, it is the confession that matters, and sometimes it seems that poetry is incidental.... The overwhelming majority of her Indian readers respond largely to her personality. (104-105)

The moods of a confessional poet are diverse and constantly shifting. One of the longer poems of Kamala Das, *Composition*, embraces such diverse moods as passionate attachment, agonizing guilt, nauseating disgust and inhuman bitterness. While celebrating her most sublime experiences she becomes aware of the most mundane as its counterpart. She does not attempt to idealize or glorify any part of the self. The same strategy may

be noted in *Blood*, where self-questionings and self-assertions intermingle to form the dominant confessional tone. Images of deep involvement in the physical act of love are followed by those of physical rotting, disgust, and sickness in poems like *The Old Playhouse*, *In Love* and *Gino*. An extreme point is reached in *Loud Posters* where she distrusts the very medium of poetry and laments its artificiality:

I have stretched my two dimensional
Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies
Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice. I have
Put my private voice away, adopted the
Typewriter's click as my only speech
(Summer in Calcutta 22).

Confessional poetry comprises autobiographical elements which exhibit the personal experiences of the poetess. T.S. Eliot, a well known critic and poet lays emphasis on the impersonality of poetry, but confessional poetry is intensely personal. However, as a great confessional poet, Kamala Das, throws light on impersonality in another way. She deftly merges the personal with the universal thus she transforms her intense personal experience into a general truth. Her own predicament and her suffering symbolise human predicament and human suffering. She is both intensely personal and universal. This reminds us of Edward Said's assertion that 'texts are worldly'. In *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Said says, "My position is that texts are worldly, to some degree they are events and even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless, a part of social world, human life and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted (4).

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