

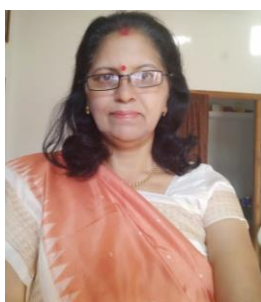


KAMALA DAS'S CHALLENGE FOR IDENTITY THROUGH WRITING

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Abstract

Kamala Das is the unique name in the field of Indian women poets who begins to create her own identity through her writing. She writes with open confession and claims her identity as a writer in the society. She is all prepared to "striptease" her inner angst and bitterness in her writings. She lay her autobiography in her writings. She retorts the meddlers who try to intervene in her way and language of writing and ask them "why not leave me alone?". In spite of hard criticism against her open and confessional writings, she falters not to halt and rather transcends herself to identify herself as the other common women and vouches to write for them as a "Loud Poster" for a "million million people" laying her two-dimensional nudity over weeklies etc. The volumes of her poetry are her real identity that she has left and through which she won the heart of thousands of people as a bold and confessional poet, superseding whom no Indian women poetry in English can be discussed.

Keywords: Identity, writings, prerogative, niche, striptease, autobiography

Introduction

One of the most significant events in the post-independence Indian English poetry is the rise of women's poetic voice, which reflects the quest for identity, position of women in society, individual space and self-assertion. The poetic world of new women poets is more real and has succeeded in asserting their identity. Purnima Bali, the research scholar appreciates the Indian women poets' free frank and daring writings with their "barest bones" hiding no suffering "behind some mark or persona" (Bali 3). Many women poets in India with their writing oeuvre challenge the pseudonym assigned to the women by the society that claims women to be somebody's 'angel' like daughter or ideal wife, or virtuous mother or good grandmother and urge it be replaced with their own individual identity. To name a few from them are: Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, Gauri Despande, Meena Alexander, Charmayne De Souza, Imtiaz Dharker, Mamta Kalia, Sunita

Namjoshi, Sunita Jain, Monika Varma, Lakshmi Kannan, Anna Sujatha Modayil, Milanie Silgado, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Lila Ray, and many more.

After the first half of the 20th century women in a great number surged writing from all parts of the world. The writing world which was monopolised by men once upon a time as their prerogative is snatched away from their monopoly and women created their own spaces in this field. Indian women too have come around and made a special niche for themselves in the writing world, creating their own identity. Out of the many Indian women, Kamala Das (1934-2009), the most controversial and daring woman poet among them has her large and daring contribution in creating the writing tradition for women. This paper explores Kamala Das's challenge for identity through writing, critically appreciating her poems. The paper is confined to her poetry, written only in English.

Kamala unwraps her own self-experienced feelings under the patriarchal society by jotting down in the form of poetry. Her attempt to make the world feel her womanly existence felt, letting out the real ongoing of the woman autobiography through her pen and not through a man creates a special niche for herself and becomes an example for the whole Indian women society, when she writes her internal psyche:

I must
most deliberately
whip up a froth of desire,
a passion to suit the desire
I must let my mind striptease
I must extrude
Autobiography ("Composition")

Kamala thinks writing is the best media for her to "striptease" her thoughts and sprawl her identity and for the whole women community. She stands for the expression of her "deliberate" "froth of desire" in her writings. Through the poem, she creates an awareness in the women that women must take stand for the expression of their own psyche. Seeing such attempts to establish their own identity of writing of the Indian women poets' as found in poets like Kamala, Rashmi Bajaj's wordings is worth to be quoted: "the issue of 'female identity' in one form or another has become an inevitable part of the contemporary Indian literary and critical discourse." (Bajaj1)

Kamala expresses her keen weakness for writing in *My Story*: "...I loved my writing more than I loved my own sons. If the need ever arose, I would without hesitation bid goodbye to my husband and sons, only to remain what I was, a writer" (MS 195). Through satire and bold confession, she embellishes her rebellious mood in the patriarchal society into poetry for its domination over women and to expose the male ego which "is tightly packed like the /sword in its sheath" ("An Introduction"). For her uninhibited frank expression she encounters hard criticism, and writes in *My Story*: "I was an eyesore to my relatives who thought me to be a threat to their respectability (MS 195) and she also

says: "with words I had destroyed my life. I had used them like sword in what was meant to be a purification dance, but blood was unwittingly shed" (198). Openly she confesses that writing is her passion and she says, "I myself had no control over my writing which emerged like a rash of prickly heat in certain seasons" (MS 195). Even though Dwibedi is unable to accept her angst and bitterness in her poetry, he confesses the greatness of Kamala as a poet and writes: "In points of enjoyment and applause, she stands to none in the whole length and breadth of Indian poetry in English today." (Dwibedi 123)

Kamala's full assured confident introduction of her own identity of writing in English can very well be assessed, when she is meddled in with her writing by others, in the society. She retorts them with her confident reply to the meddlers' "not to" like interference in her honest confessing expression as a human being, even if it is half Indian and half English and seems funny:

.....Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother tongue. Why not leave
Me, alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Everyone of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, mine alone. ("An Introduction")

It is noteworthy that though Kamala was a bilingual writer, writing both in Malayalam and in English, as a poet, she was only an English poet, feeling at ease while writing in English. Women writings are still looked down upon in a pejorative way in the modern society like India, creating some images of "angry women", how "they" hate men, how "they" want to go against nature-and god, and how "they" are all lesbians (hooks vii-viii). Kamala is intrepid to such biased views of the society and through her writings, claims her humanity as a member belonging to the human species, having equal rights as the other men have. Kamala is attempted to be interrupted by the social categorisers' hard criticism for her anti-conventional

sort of writing as a woman, when she makes use of irony and satire to vent out her complaints against the injustices meted out to the women. But, very daringly she retorts them with her own way and asks to accept her as she is, not expect her to be as they want her to. Seeing her true voice articulated in the liveliest way, Bruce King says: "she showed how an Indian woman poet could create a space for herself in the public world" (152). Women writers are afraid of being "ghettoised and of being marginalized" to express their feelings openly in writing as they know that "patriarchal viewpoints are not very generous in conceding it space or equality" (Jain xix). Yet, Kamala is daring enough to express her experiences. Even if she is satired for writing in English she feels writing in English has become a passion for her as it voices her joys, longings and all her hopes. She openly confesses:

.....It is half English, half
 Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
 It is as human as I am human, don't
 You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
 Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
 Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it
 Is human speech, the speech of the mind that
 is
 Here and not there, a mind that sees and
 hears and
 Is aware ("An Introduction").

She defends herself arguing that through her writing in English she voices her joys and longings and expresses a mind that "sees and hears and is aware". Kamala's attempt of justifying the importance of her discreet individual capabilities, her likes and dislikes rightly proves Bruce King's statement: "Writing is a means of creating a place in the world; the use of the personal voice and self-revelations are means of self-assertion" (King 152). Showalter also gives the same view on women's writing in her essay, "Feminist Criticism in Wilderness" that writing process is like giving birth to children and since females have the capacity to give new life, therefore she carries the potential to

generate texts. It is not necessary that the beings who don't have pen (penis) as a tool cannot write. Rashmi Bajaj too becomes impressed with the Indian women's effort of writing to make their identity and to free the women from the age-old bondage, "pen was a phallic symbol" and "its use was considered a male prerogative" and "a woman was thought to be 'genetically unsuited' for literary production", but she adores seeing a large number of modern women poets "indefatigably writing verse" (quid.in Bajaj[a] 11). It is writing, which transcends Kamala to take stand on behalf of the whole women community. Kamala in the poem, "Loud Posters" declares her preparedness to be the 'loud posters' to articulate on behalf of the whole suffering community:

I am today a creature turned inside
 Out. To spread myself across wide highways
 Of your thoughts, stranger like a loud poster
 Was always my desire. ("Loud Posters")

As after 1970s, there surged a plenty of women's writing in the Western countries sharing their feelings and experiences as woman, in India too, women writers and poets from all over every state came over with their pen, expressing themselves creating writing identity of their own. Kamala Das is one such daring poet, who through her pen strives to be a representative of the women society and be "loud posters" announcing the women's thoughts in her poems. She renounces the traditional society's age old conventional thinking on women, who are not allowed to express their mind, their feelings and desires in public for which she is considered as a "creature turned inside out". With Kamala like poets' unconventional thought the society's conventional image of suppression gets disturbed and it gets the women psyche revealed to the society. So, Bajaj says, "Women writing in India have been a disturbing mirror of Indian society and is also the revelation of evolving psyche of Indian women." (Bajaj[b]1)

Writing not only makes Kamala contended for her self-expression, but transcends her from her personal pains and sufferings to a broader identity of a general representative of women. She conveys

her effort of putting her private voice away to transcend to a higher identity on behalf of all the suffering community and to be the “type-writer’s click” as her only identity:

.....I have stretched my two-dimensional
Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,
Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice.I’ve put
My private voice away, adopted the
Typewriter’s click as my only speech;.....
...though you may have no need of
Me, I go on and on not knowing why...(“Loud
Posters”)

She again identifies herself as a representative of a ‘million million people’ because of her transcendence, which she feels is gifted to her through her writing:

I am a million, million people
Talking all at once, with voices
Raised in clamour, like maids
At village-wells (“Someone Else’s Song”)

Kamala too is observed to be transcending to a broader aspect and acknowledges herself as the representative of all women through her writings and identifies herself as ‘every woman’: “I am every woman who seeks love” (“An Introduction”). This transcendental identity is again and again asserted by her in many poems, written by her; one from them is in “Composition”:

We are all alike,
We women,
In our wrappings of hairless skin.
All skeletons are alike,
Only the souls vary (“Composition”)

So, for such a great ambition Kamala transcends herself to a higher identity of an agent to be the spokes person on behalf of the women society. In this context Jasbir Jain gives her views that acquiring ‘agency’ would assign the women with decision making capabilities in every field.

Kamala condemns the society’s attitude of imposing a girl child threatening her to call her with a schizophrenic or “nympho” identity, if she tries to lead a life of freedom as per her will:

Be Amy, or be Kamala, Or, better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, a role. Don’t play pretending
games.
Don’t play at schizophrenia or be a
Nympho. (“An Introduction”)

Kamala’s claim for women’s due identity appears in a multi-faceted ways. After exposing the society’s hypocritical and imposing role for the female child in the poem, “An Introduction”, she brings the modern women’s assertive identity formation as a human being at the end of the poem “Introduction”. When the dominating society does not allow Kamala to lead a life of her own and tries to interrupt it with their “fit in” and “belong” sorts of commands, she retorts them boldly acknowledging them to accept her original individuality and identity as she is:

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 the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours,
no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I
 (“An Introduction”).

Dwivedi observes such vein of speaking for the whole community in Kamala’s poetry and suggests, “Kamala as a poet is never tired of speaking aloud for womankind as a whole, and several of her poems should be read in this light.” (Dwivedi 29)

Kamala assuredly does reflect the true ongoing of the women in their writings as they themselves are women and can grasp the womanly situation better than the men. Men, however, talented and tricky in the field of playful words,

cannot read out the heart and mind of the women and recreate them as exactly as the women can because the women writers/poets as they themselves are the subject women. Beauvoir also supposes the same thing: "Yet we know the feminine world more intimately than men do because our roots are in it; we grasp more immediately what the fact of being female means for a human being, and we care more about knowing it." (TSS 36)

Critics like Dwibedi disapproves women's writing like Kamala's and Jane Austen's saying it as "narrow in range" (Dwibedi 20). But, to such comments, Jasbir Jain's interpretation would be the best answer to cite out the reasons for its slow outcome and limited range:

There were not enough women writers and not enough access to education to make their writing possible; history has ignored and submerged their contribution, their work has been dismissed as concerned with a limited world of experience as they were confined to domestic life. Women's writing has also been dismissed as hardly of any consequence because religious and political thought had assigned them a place of subordination and labelled them as beings less rational and intellectual than the male of the species. (Jain 2)

For her explanation Jain elucidates George Eliot, who herself was a woman writer, but finds faults in the plots and settings of the women novelists in her essay, "Silly Novels By Lady Novelists". Jasbir Jain shows that in spite of Eliot's finding faults in the women's writings, she could not stop adoring for the women's writing and quotes Eliot's words: "degree of critical enthusiasm has no logical relation to the quality of the work. When women show talent, critical enthusiasm drops to the freezing point." (qutd. in Jain 2)

Kamala Das, thus created a havoc in the world of women writing daringly identifying herself openly expressing her womanly feelings and experiences without inhibiting anything to herself. She has created not only her own identity through her writings, but has become a great inspiration to many women to write in regional languages as well as in English. She proved the men's world in India to be

wrong of having the concept that the writing kingdom is reined by them alone. It is observed that after Kamala Das many more Indian women poets came forward with their writing oeuvre expressed publicly in front of others and bringing lots of changes to the women's writings. Indian women poets' writings cannot be discussed without laminating Kamala Das's poetry. Her writings become a treasure house for ages of Indian women writers to look back.

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