
KAMALA DAS: AN 'EYE' CONOCLAST

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Wipeout the paints, unmould the clay

Let nothing remain of that yesterday. (Das, "My Story")

One of the earliest known and most widespread forms of inequality in the human history is Male Dominance. Women have been suffering the atrocities of man since ages and they have lived within their houses like a caged bird having no freedom and opportunity to realize their dreams. A number of women writers came forward to be the voice of the voiceless or the muted women especially to establish their identity in a world that seeks to marginalize them. From those uncountable names who raised their voice against such social injustice, one name that stands next to none in the whole length and breadth of Indian poetry in English today is Kamala Das.

Way ahead of her time, Das unlocked a space for women to finally speak of their desires and voice out their angst instead of fading into the four walls of marital and household duties. She projects herself as a rebel woman in a remarkable boldness in her works and makes public her traditionally private experiences suggesting that women's personal feelings of longing and loss are a part of the collective experience of womanhood. She exposes the bitter truth of a woman's life and her quest for love for which she is regarded as an iconoclast. Moreover, she tries to break the societal norms which have tethered the women to their lives without an identity and selfhood.

Recognized as one of India's foremost poets, Kamala Das has to her credit prose and poetical writings in which she highlights the plight of Indian women caught in the morass of effete conventions-social and familial. But at the first instance they portray her joys and sorrows, happiness and agony that she herself experienced in different situations of her life. She is a

sensitive soul recording in her poetry and novels all the intimations of wrong and turbulence that she feels she underwent through her life. What distinguishes her writing is her ability to transform her personal experiences into something general, to give a universal coloring to her personal sufferings. Through the presentation of her own experiences in her famous autobiography, *My Story*, in most of her poems and even essays and through the various situations depicted in her short stories, she has highlighted the various images and roles of an Indian woman, as a wife, a mother, a daughter, a mistress and even as a prostitute. She 'has focused her attention on the problems faced by a woman in a male-governed social set-up, the categorized roles assigned to her, the prejudiced attitude of man towards woman, the status and identity of a female child, the treatment of woman mainly as a sexual object, and the new concepts and problems arising for her in the wake of changing socio-cultural and economic scenario (*Literary Voice* 11) .

Rebelled against social conventions and bourgeois mortality, Das shunned hypocrisy and petty-mindedness. Her confessions were intense and lucid. Although the roots of patriarchy are so deeply entrenched yet Kamala Das became courageous enough to question bluntly and took the cudgel. Identifying herself with every woman who spends life in misery and bondage she wants to break the shackles of patriarchy. In the words of Prasantha Kumar:

Kamala Das conceives of the male as a beast wallowing in lust with a monstrous ego under which the women lose their identity. The strong desire of freedom , including the freedom to rebel, forms the central stain in many of her poems. She enumerates the male felonies in her poems and builds up a structure of protest and rebellion in her poetry...several poems of Das convey the tedium and monotony of sex within and outside marriage...their love is a disgusted lust, a poor substitute for real love. The life of Das' persona may be considered a tale to her experiments with love and repeated failures of her experiments force her ego to be resentful and defiant. She looks upon each encounter as a substitute for the real experiment of true love. (34-35)

In an autobiographical verse and brilliantly expressive poem, "An Introduction", Kamala Das is elucidating life of a woman in a patriarchal society and her perpetual exploitation due to a continuous bondage of conventions. It depicts how the males have been ruling the

country without giving any right to women although they possess all those qualities that make him superior and how woman is asked to place herself in stereotyped gender roles of mother, wife and daughter and forget her identity outside the known parameters of existence. The point is she wants to rebel against the injunction for docility and hence she even puts on an androgenic appearance. (175, *kundu*). Kamala Das targets the traditional sex roles assigned to women by the patriarchy. In this poem one finds resentment and refusal:

I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. ("Introduction")

The indifference of man to woman's miseries is depicted in her poem "The Stone Age". It records the casual treatment of her lustful husband with her in the most explicit and unabashed manner – lust that leads to lifelessness and kills individuality and sense of freedom. To quote from it:

You turn me into a bird of stone,
a granite dove,
You build around me a shabby drawing room
And strike my face absentmindedly while you read.

Indian women, Das argued, did not discuss these experiences in deference to social mores and she consistently refused to accept their silence. In her work, *The Maggots* feelings of longing and loss are confined to a private misery, but rather they are invited into the public sphere and acknowledged. Das insisted that these feelings had been experienced by women across time. From the collection, *The Descendants*, Das illustrated how old the sufferings of women are. She framed the pain of lost love with ancient Hindu myths. (de Souza 13). A highly sensitized Radha of the Indian Radha-Krishna mythological lore feels the same kind of ossified feeling in her relationship with her husband:

That night in her husband's arms, Radha felt
So dead that he asked, What is wrong,

Do you mind my kisses, love? And she said,

No, not at all, but thought, What is

It to the corpse if the maggots nip?

Das finds a devotional means of self fulfilling and elevation to the role of the victor by invoking the Mira Bai and Radha-Krishna myths that merge in the ultimate consciousness – God, and Radha surrenders herself in the blissful union with Lord Krishna, the eternal love, so Kamala too merges with the eternal lover and thus escapes the travails of an unhappy love life.

What distinguishes her among the women poets of India is her bold frankness in articulating sexual urges and feelings. She is the most renowned Indian woman poet of the confessional mode and easily places herself in the company of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. The following extract from “Forest Fire” shows her in the frankest and yet most confessional mood which makes her a class apart:

Of late I have begun to feel a hunger
To take in with greed , like a forest-fire that
Consumes, and, with each killing gains a wilder,
Brighter charm, all that comes my way...
My eyes lick at you like flames, my nerves
Consume; and, when I finish with you, in the
Pram, near the tree and, on the park bench, I spit
Out small heaps of ash, nothing else

She may not command the intellectual vigor of the two poets of the confessional mode mentioned above, but ‘she does not lag behind in lyrical outburst of unpremeditated thoughts and feelings and in emotional intensity. In truth, she is more aware of the pathos in life of a common woman playing a very passive role in our tradition- bound society than some of these women poets highlighting a different cultural and moral ethos’ (Dwivedi 118).

Kamala Das' aim as a poet is to underline the predicament of contemporary women beset by crises of divided selves. She wants to bring harmony out of this existence. Her poems are remarkable because they reveal her feelings of anxiety, alienation, meaninglessness, and futility, acute sense of isolation, fragmentation and loss of identity. Modern Indian woman's ambivalence is presented through her poems. She seems to have a good deal of conventional woman in her and other than that the combination in herself to wish for domestic security and the desire for independence. Alongside her unfulfilled need for love there is the need to assert, to conquer and to dominate (Iyer 193-194).

As an iconoclast Das shook the literary world with her frank, bold and controversial writings. She emerged as a pioneer of those who expressively articulated the taboo experiences of Indian women. She asserted her feminine identity on the firmament of Indian English Poetry by honestly writing about her experiences as a woman that break through the hypocritical vaneer of man-woman relationship in Indian traditional society. Though she made a significant departure from the tradition of writing poetry by the erstwhile female Indian poets such as Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu. She apprehended a celebration of the universal experience of love, despair, anguish, disgust against the traditional mode of gender manifestations through an Indian feminine awareness.

Das believes that we have to break the shackles of male chauvinism to march towards a society that accepts and respects gender equality. It is high time that society should stop objectifying women as sex objects. The societal norms and social attitudes towards women need drastic change. Women must develop the inner strength and confidence to stand and speak for them. Women should stop being mute spectators to any form of violence and they should realize the 'Shakti', which means the power within them and become independent to be able to herald a society which treats women with dignity.

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