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Feminist Thought in Poetics of Kamala Das: A Perspective

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Abstract

The paper attempts an analytical study of the poetics of Kamala Das through the specific prism of the feminist ideology. Das, with her novel spectrum of poetry, announced the arrival of a fresh and indomitable female voice on the Indian English literary scene. Debunking the artifice of patriarchy and its oppressive function, she set out to live her life on her own terms. Her writings speak volumes about her extremely free and courageous outlook on life. We barely meet any inhibitions or ambiguities in her. Her verse verily reflects what she felt, thought and actually lived out. She is India's answer to the American coterie of confessional poets as she limns a brutally honest portrait of her deeply felt angst, pain and

bewilderment against the male-dominated superstructure in our society, in the most striking of confessional tones. A perusal of her ballistic verse opens floodgates to the understanding of the plight and predicament of the females' section entrenched against the particular backdrop of the stereotypical Indian set up. Her anger and exasperation become her panacea. The fire that she sets on the paper through her verse becomes a torch lighting up the pathway to a more dignified, humanistic and cohesive status for the female folk.

Keywords:

Self, emotions, feminist, patriarchal, exploration, unconventional.

The very quintessence of literature is humanism. It is an artistic plea for the amelioration of an ailing society. Literature penned across the world not just represents an unequivocal picture of the society – entailing its variegated topography – but also makes a subtle yet strong entreaty for upholding the ideals of equality and wholesomeness for all irrespective of any man-made barrier.

In the territory of post-modern Indian English poetry, Kamala Das occupies a conspicuous position as that of an indefatigable and pioneering woman poet who has ferociously stood against the marginalization of the female folk in Indian society by carving out a poetics of protest and rebellion. The poetics of Kamala Das laid bare not only her close subjective feminine experience in a

male-dominated set up but also gave significant expression to the cumulative experience of the female section at large. Employing her volatile and unalloyed poetic thought, she has amply succeeded in critiquing and holding a true mirror to the hypocritical and insensitive Indian social framework. She created for herself an astonishing niche with her strong feminist themes and a surpassingly bold handling of the same. As K. R. Srinivas Iyengar rightly identifies, she stood apart as “...aggressively individualistic of the new poets..” (Indian Writing in English 2009) She is aptly celebrated for her uninhibited adoption of a fierce poetic metaphor for reflecting her personal sense of an anguished inadequacy. The art form became for her a room of her own whereby she sought to vent out her deep existential feminist predicament. Her poetic works like *Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants*, *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, announced the arrival of a female poetic stance that was absolutely unabashed, critical and perturbing with its originality and conviction.

Employing her *selfhood* as the central motif, Das has shown large human catholicity and with utmost poetic sincerity she managed to express the intangible mass of human emotions in experience. It is befitting that we find her saying, “...I myself had no control over my writing which emerged like a rash of prickly heat in certain season..” (My Story 1976)

The season Das dwells upon is evidently the season of her fundamental, undulating life-odyssey which has also been the poetic nucleus of all the confessional poets. As such her poetry can be identified with the confessional verse of the popular coterie of confessional poets of America, the likes of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, etc in America, who unleashed their pent up experience in verses, and like Das, stood in splendid isolation amongst their contemporaries with their unmistakable heavy personal notes. Das, shaking the pan-Indian literary scene, wrote of her personal anguish in an effortless feminist manner. This may adequately be called her expressive form. It is the one that is characterized by an intense study of her very personal experiences; however her poetry is not just a confession but also a formidable voicing of her identity. She, through her lucid lyrics, establishes herself firmly as a bewildered female yearning for love in a world that rarely understands her and rather leaves her disillusioned and more ill at ease with what she encounters.

What is ever more remarkable in Das is that her poetry mirrors her life in all its unapologetic nakedness – the overwhelming gamut of oft-experienced tremors and the rarely-relished joys of love. Not just her verse, her life itself tends to violate the deeply engraved, systematized and conventional norms and standards and she makes an affirmation to a form of life which is defiant of all the age-worn, stilted mores of existence. Poetic creation for her is therefore an act of confrontation and not at all a sanctuary of escape.

The poetry of Das comes to bespeak a genre by itself. Her language overflows like an unfettered brook carrying with it all her emotional perceptions, centering around themes such as profound frustration in love and disturbed interpersonal relationships. In her poems, she/the woman appears as the beloved and the betrayed unobtrusively without any mawkishness. She attempts to grapple and somehow find little repose in a world full of callousness, a world devoid of a strengthening and fulfilling love. As such we find that her poetry is underlined by a process of an emotional or psychological peeling off and she explores her varied inner terrains with a disarming avowal. She is ruthlessly candid and astonishingly unsparing in her statements about her own life and she does not care to camouflage her deepest of emotions and intentions under a needless and cumbersome shroud of innuendoes or insinuations. She rather speaks loud about her melancholy and excruciation. The ever-constricting and suffocating role of society is mocked by her when she cries,

*“...Fit in. Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls or peep in through our lace-draped windows.
Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or, better
Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to
Choose a name, role. Don't play pretending games.....”*
(*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* 2011)

There is always palpable in her the constant resistance against a pressing compulsion from society's end to

coerce her into fitting in; the fitting in not only as a woman, a citizen but also as a writer. Her poem, *An Introduction*, becomes a strong statement of her woes as woman and writer and she undauntedly lampoons the artistic echelons and the social ones for continually issuing her dictates on how to be a writer and also a woman. She rebels against the stereotypes and challenges them too with her honest courage. There are no regrets in her for who she is and how she is. Sans any inhibitions, she stumbles, pauses and moves with no signs of repentance for living out her original self. She talks of her unabated, authentic journey and thereby, offers an implicit nod of universality in her stormy monologue for all the female folks around,

“...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. ...”
(*The Old Playhouse and Other Poems 2011*)

Her wedlock failed her and could not bring her the much-desired fruition of love. She garnered a seething desire for love in a matrimony jeopardized by a stale stereotypical system. Feeling repelled by the whole conjugal jamboree shorn of true feeling and real fulfillment, she debunked all traditional ties. Poems like *In Love* present confrontation with the sheer traumatic memories of ennui and emptiness that set in after non-fulfillment. It is therefore no surprise that she assails and disapproves such love,

*“...This skin-communicated
Thing that I dare not yet in
His presence call our love...”
(The Old Playhouse and Other Poems , 2011)*

A perusal of her compositions gives us a feeling as if from some deep abyss of her huge yearning self, is gushing forth a cascade of her poems which proclaims its refusal to be so easily categorized. As if her poems proffer a wide horizon of her musings on what life is to her and how conversely it has in the course triggered more than a score of arguments and controversies. Her openness in the delineation of experiences as a woman, much opposed and unsavoury to the conventional Indian sensibility, has led to critical flak. Adroitly using the English language to supplant the feminine in a new light, she unveils new vistas on her poetic sensibility. She opts for inventing a spectrum of metaphors and idioms to suit her poetic purpose.

*“...I like to call this poetry even if my words lose their music
when, after raising in my innards a beautiful liquid
turbulence, they come to surface in the relatively solid
contours of prose. I had always longed for the strength
necessary to write this. But poetry does not grow ripe for us;
we have to grow ripe enough for poetry...” (My Story 1976)*

While a few of her poems appear as simple, some others come across as abstruse pieces verging on the fine points of philosophy—akin to some fugacious flashes of a slippery verse merging into some inexplicable chaos. They appear as an embroidery of random thoughts and after-thoughts taken from the memory of the monotony of

everyday life. She goes into the issues that make and break the world of the female experience at large. Therefore, the way she writes appears like a performance both at the metaphorical and literal planes. She admits poetry as a visceral response and harnesses an exuberant play with words. She admonishes,

*“..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, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. ..” (The Old Playhouse and Other
Poems 2011)*

Evidently the apparently unconventional poetry of Das is such so as to reconcile her complex attitude to life with the very framework of her art. Her poems feel like an outpouring or an interminable dilemma of a post-modern explorer with all her mysteries and unfathomable private worlds for the readership to witness. There is as if a profusion of some sort of pluralities born out of an ambivalent space of resounding silences and evolving conflicts. Quite arguably therefore the questions that her poems open up are as many and as diverse as her response to situations that she encounters as a person and as a poet.

The *self* expressed by her comes to represent a fragmented kaleidoscopic one, as located within and coloured by various discourses ranging from her

womanhood to her individuality. The very dilemma of being constructed as a woman through certain ideas, of identities layered one over another are some of her feministic as well as poetic preoccupations. Her efforts emphasize the impossibility to find a one unified *self* that is true for all times. She rather becomes a universal voice,

“...Only those who like to listen,

Listen

What I narrate are the ordinary

Events of an ordinary life...” (The Old Playhouse and Other Poems 2011)

Emancipating her verse from the weight of past traditions of meter and also disrobing it of some conservative poetic diction, language and rhetoric, Das as a new age poet has definitely found a new ‘voice’ for herself. Writing about her feminist regrets and pleas in free verse, Das has created her own set of poetic cadences and rhythms. There lies in her verse an accomplished handling of content with regards to the tone, tenor and also the length of the lines which are made to vary in proportion to the issue or theme in her mind. Suffusing her poems with a quantum of briskness, urgency and nonchalance, she easily brings home the very purpose of her writings. Her poems become inveterately emblematic of her deep sense of personal bereavement and misery. They are interspersed with different shades and nuances of her vast experience dotted with feelings of an unending nostalgia, excruciating pain at losses she eternally regrets.

Poetry to Kamala Das is explicitly redemptive and therapeutic too. Discovering Kamala Das, one encounters her desperations and dejections that foreground the very fountainhead of her tragic vision. The innocent past, the chaotic present and a promising future – all come together to compose the unfinished symphony that her life is. Pain is central to her existence, an all-pervasive motif, lending her verse its dynamic richness. She achieves her force from her retreats as also eternal cravings.

Quintessentially, discussing Kamala Das and her poetry, implies a significant detailing of a whole labyrinth of issues relating to gender, abuse, self-identity and also language and the art of writing itself entailing a serious poetics of subjectivity. She fills the reader with an uncanny sense of perturbation and exhaustion with a forthright expression of her immense personal experience of constant emotional hurts and agonies. Jettisoning the burden of any artistic obligations, she embarks on an ‘unraveling of experience’ – whereby we see her and feel with her the recesses of her mental and emotional landscapes. There is courage in her vulnerability – the entangled mass of her love-hate relationships, her phobias, her obsessions and her muffled emotions. For some, her poetics might come across as some thematic stasis of feminist diatribe, but even that becomes relegated to background when her dazzling passionate indulgence and emotional proclivity are encountered. There is in her the uncompromising need and exigent adherence to render her inner trauma as toughly and

offensively as possible. This taboo-smashing firebrand woman poet of the Indian subcontinent continues to enchant her readers with the poignant poetic catharsis that her work is. The world of poetry is indebted to her for the nonpareil contribution she has made in the celebration of her *self* that comes to powerfully epitomize the celebration of the Indian female – mapping her choices, her challenges and her eventual victories.

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