

The Sinner and The Saint: The Many Voices of Kamala Das as The Poet of Body, Love, Reclusion and Rebellion

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Abstract: Writing was a way for Kamala Das (1932-2009) to celebrate her selves. Kamala Das's poems is like reading multiple entities. Readers may get a peek of Kamala Das's various personas through her prose and poetry, whether they were written in Malayalam or English. Through her poetry, she allowed us to see many different sides of herself, including those of a poet, lover, devotee, young lady, wife, mother, middle-aged woman, urbanite, Keralite, and others. Her poetry is overtly physical, dripping with the fluidity of existence itself and bridging the gap between the intellect and body. She is a fragile woman, a lonely poet, and an introvert starving for companionship. She is a rebel at the same time, a sturdy woman who shouts out her claim to the right to speak and write. The employment of multiple identities, equally varied tongues, different experimental patterns, free verse and numerous devices by Kamala Das to create countless moods for her poetry is what makes them extraordinary and one-of-a-kind. The following paper tries to discuss selected poems of Kamala Das and discover how in Kamala Das's poetry, a 'sinner' becomes a 'saint' and vice versa, a 'beloved' gets 'betrayed', how there are a number of entities in there, literally: the Aami, the Kamala Surayya, the Madhavikkutty and the Kamala Das, and how at the end of the thoughts everything melts into each other.

Keywords: Body, Feminism, Form and Structure, Identities, Indian English Poetry, Kamala Das, Love, Patriarchy, Rebellion, Voices.

1. Introduction

In The Western Canon, Harold Bloom asks the question, 'What makes the author and the works canonical?' and as the reply to this question he states 'the answer more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange'. In a way Kamala Das assimilates us and we take her poetry as an authentic representation of numerous personalities, the personality of a woman, a lover, a beloved, a mother, a daughter, a grand-daughter, an adolescent, a youth, and moreover, a human being, distraught with fear and anguish, loneliness and rebellion. Her poems are explicitly physical, oozing the liquidity of the very fact of existing, as well as transcending the boundary between mind and body. She is a lonely poet, a delicate woman, an introvert gasping for company. At the same time, she is a rebel, a loud and stout woman declaring her own right to speak and write.

2. Kamala Das: The Rebel with Numerous Faces

What makes Kamala Das's poems unique and incredible is the use of numerous selves and equally varied tongues she uses to set innumerable moods for her poems and not for once, the reader is able to identify one particular woman in them. Her revelation of her own selves is as varied as her representations of repressed women; they are similar in the ethos, but different in their experiences, adjacent to each other through a thread of pain, yet distant from each other in the ways they handle the pain, both bodily and beyond. Reading Kamala Das's poems is like reading different entities, linguistically, emotionally, structurally and spiritually. Kamala Das's prose and poetry, whether written in Malayalam or English, gave readers a glimpse of her multiple identities. Writing, to Kamala Das (1932-2009), was a form of self-celebration. She gave us a peek at many different sides of herself through her poems, including poet, lover, devotee, kid, woman, wife, mother, middle-aged woman, urbanite, Keralite, and more. Her poetry in English is known for its unwavering directness and astounding sensitivity in the portrayal of the female sensibility. One is enthralled by how effortlessly and exhilaratingly she crossed language barriers, seasoning her Malayalam with English idioms, spicing her English with a flavour of the Indian and the vernacular, and adorning both with a dash of urban Hindi. Her poetry was written in plain, unadorned prose, and she moulded her fiction in poetic lyricism, the modalities of the two blending together. In this paper, I venture to re-read a few selected poems of Kamala Das, discover how they lay bare infinitesimal voices of the poet, and critically describe how those different voices and stances, polyvalent as they are, make Kamala Das stand as a distinct figure in the 20th Century Indian Poetry in English and beyond.

1) *Finding an Identity, Discovering Many More*

Kamala Das's poetry begins with pain and anguish caused by her loss of freedom to live her life the way she wished. Her strongest and most popular poem, "An Introduction" sets the tone for her poetry and, eponymously, introduces her as a poet, a woman, an anguished soul, a lover, and moreover an individual human being with her power to withstand the barriers stopping one from being oneself. Das's conflicted feelings

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about the system that governs her existence and the lives of countless other suffering women are explored in this poem. She also has the knowledge of tyranny and freedom because she was a key player in the founding of the Indian feminist movement. The poem appeared in her debut collection, *Summary*, which was released in Calcutta in 1965. In this poem she first emerges as an insecure child, then a youth facing repression by society, and then an adult betrayed in love. We can see numerous strata of agony and sighs in this piece. The many layers of Das's personality can be defined by these lines:

I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one.

Here, Das examines important equal rights, freedom, and the concept of marriage. This poem strongly supports women's right to free choice and makes a very obvious feminist argument. This applies to all facets of life, but the poet emphasizes marriage in particular. She contrasts and compares the social roles played by men and women and explains to the reader how her life and the laws she is compelled to follow limit her independence. While reading the poem, readers should be able to reflect on how, if at all, the concepts Das is discussing relate to their own lives. Whether nothing makes sense, people could wonder why and if some sort of unconscious privilege is improving their lives.

2) *The Structure of Das's Poems as a Mouthpiece of Many Facets of an Identity*

The portrayal of Das's many faces is set up not only in the subject matter of the poem, but in the form and structure of it as well. The poem is divided into a single stanza and has sixty lines. The lines don't have a set metrical structure and range in length from three to eleven words. Das also decided against employing a rhyming pattern. This denotes the poem's use of free verse. With this writing style, the poet is free to experiment with different forms and employ more erratic rhymes. In "An Introduction," there are many instances of internal rhyme and half-rhyme. In the poem, she employs devices like anaphora, repetition, and enjambment. She is caught between the world's attempt to restrict her and her own desire for a free life. The statement's conclusion is one of dissent and defiance. Das claims that she has "Aches" that are uniquely her own. Despite coming in and out of numerous voices of the self, at last the poet emerges as an independent woman who has the strength and courage to call herself 'I', with all its hues:

It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,
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.

3) *A Caged Wife and A Free Bird: A Lover, A Beloved and A Poet of the Body and the Mind*

In the poem "The Old Playhouse", we see a tortured wife. In the poem, the stage is the poet's mind, and the actors are drifting emotions, regrets, and fragments of thought and memory that perform in the shadows with all the lights turned off. The poem represents the poet's protest against the male dominance and the subsequent diminution of the woman. The exquisite play of words reveals the plight of a housewife whose egocentric and male chauvinist husband has virtually reduced her aspiring self to a mere toy. As a result, the caged wife, with her crippled spirit, is helplessly destined to witness the pathetic transformation of her mind into 'an old playhouse with all its lights put out'. The network of evocative and concrete imagery and imaginative symbols transcends an individual's suffering and makes it a generic experience. When Das refers to her husband's ego, she is blatantly highlighting the unequal nature of their relationship. Her experience with her father is comparable to this. Both of these individuals are examples of patriarchy, which devalues women by placing them in the "appropriate" position below men. It causes her to lose her will and reason and causes her to mumble, which indicates a stop in her speech. In fact, she turns off the "lights" in her head. The implications that can be derived from the symbolism of the word "light" are numerous. We see the same wounded self of a woman, as a lover, wife and beloved, in the poems like "The Freaks", "Substitute", "The Sunshine Cat", "Composition", "Glass" and "Too Early the Autumn Sights" to name a few. According to Marcus J. Borg, "The symbolism of light and darkness is ancient, archetypal and cross-cultural. It has many rich resonances of meaning. "The Freaks" from *Summer in Calcutta* serves as a good example of Kamala Das's depiction of the conjugal life as a mechanical and soulless tie. Here Das reveals herself as a tortured wife, looking at the man with contempt, frustration and pity, a woman who is obliged to smile at the man with her desires unfulfilled, her heart emptied:

He talks, turning a sun-stained
Cheek to me, his mouth, a dark
Cavern, where stalactites of
Uneven teeth gleam, his right
Hand on my knee, while our minds
Are willed to race towards love;
But, they only wander, tripping idly over puddles of
Desire...Can't this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers...
I am a freak. It's only
To save my face, I flaunt,
at Times, a grand, flamboyant lust.

Poems such as "The Old Playhouse," "An Introduction," "The Freaks," and "The Looking Glass" are instances of the poet's wounded self. "In Love" also reflects on sexuality and unfulfilled desire of the wife within marriage, in the absence of love:

...when mouth on
 Mouth, I lie, ignoring my poor
 Moody mind, while pleasure
 With deliberate gaiety
 Trumpets harshly into the
 Silence of the room...

In these poems one of the principal themes is the dichotomy of body and love, physical and emotional. Kamala Das is the first Indian Woman who establishes her position as someone who seeks equal rights in terms of both the body and the mind, and poetry is the mode of rebellion that she chooses, her loneliness, her reclusion become the most crucial elements of that mode and she becomes one of the strongest rebels with a vital cause. For Das, love is something that can be felt through the body, but at the same time will transcend the body.

4) *Collision of Many Selves and the Emerging Self*

Das looked for relationships with men outside of her marriage because she was dissatisfied with her own marriage and did not have the intellectual collaboration she desired. She wasn't simply looking for sexual freedom; she also wanted a strong emotional connection and a fulfilment of her unmet desires. When Das's need for love is not met in her own marriage, she looks to other men. It should be noted that marriage in the Nair society is a social contract in which the man performs sexual service rather than primarily a union based on love. He therefore has no authority inside home, and this arrangement may be cancelled whenever the wife so desires. In the poem "Substitute" Das emerges as a woman, wounded with lack of love and empathy, seeking comfort in multiple affairs:

Our bodies after love-making
 Turned away, rejecting.
 Our words began to sound
 Like clatter of swords in fight.
 After that love became a swivel-door,
 When one went, out, another came in,
 Then I lost count, for always in my arms
 Was a substitute for a substitute.

When numerous identities collide with each other, crisis comes. This acute crisis of identity is depicted in the poem "Glass". This identity crisis also tries to find its cure in the extramarital affairs. In the poem "Spoiling the Name", Kamala Das portrays how a name limits the potential of a human being and represses numerous other voices that want to come out. There are voices that cannot be named, cannot be put into words, but as a poet she keeps on fighting for saving those voices:

... for I know I have a life
 To be lived, and each nameless
 Corpuscule in me, has its life to
 Be lived...

In the poems like "My Mother at Sixty-six", "My Father's

Death" and "Next to Indira Gandhi", Das's voice becomes that of a daughter, sensitive and tormented, hiding her tears yet letting it flow, a recluse, a rebel, a human being. Kamala Das's maturity as a poet with innumerable radical voices reaches another dimension in the poem "Loud Poster" which exquisitely announces the self of a poet as everyone else's. She says that she has published her most personal feelings and emotions in books and periodicals primarily to locate her real self. She breaks the boundary between the real and the unreal, the private and the public, the woman and the man, the inner and the outer world, and lets her many selves come out at once, screaming their own opinions, own poetry:

I am today a creature turned inside
 Out. To spread myself across wide highways
 Of your thought, stranger, like a loud poster
 Was always my desire, but all I
 Do is lurk in shadows of cul de sac...
 ...I've
 Spent long years trying to locate my mind...
 ...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...

3. Conclusion

Reading and studying Kamala Das lend us ways to delve into different worlds, various lives, diverse identities: painful and happy, silent and loud, oppressed and subversive, hungry and content, loved and hated, captive and free. Besides being a wife, a feminist poet and a rebel, she is a human being who unapologetically keeps modifying her own opinions sometimes, she becomes confused, eulogizes chaos, worships the heteroglossia- the Aami, Madhavikkutty, the Kamala Surayya, the Kamala Das in her; one in many, many in one. Her poems are full of surprises, dramas and chaos; her emotional stances make her poems private and public at the same time. She is the phoenix, so are her poems, rising from the ashes of her former self, in multiple prototypes, to please and surprise, to sleep and wake, to torment and tease, to make ways to newer discoveries of her voices in her writing, voices so tireless that they never cease to come to her "like leaves on a tree", and ironically enough, those chaotic words emerge "from a silence, somewhere deep within..."

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