

# Kamala Das as A Confessional Poetess

## Abstract

Kamala Das has an immense contribution to the growth of Indian English poetry. Her poetry is spontaneous. Kamala Das writes about herself and the subject matter of her poetry is her personal experiences. She makes a discovery of human existence. The theme of love is one of the prominent features of her confessional poetry. In her poem 'Of Calcutta' she treats the theme of gender roles as well as the wounded self of a woman. In short, it can be said that Kamala Das has written in a confessional mode the experiences she has gone through her personal life.

**Keywords:** Reconciliation, Compelling, Exhibitionism, Articulation

## Introduction

Kamala Das enjoys a distinguished place in the Indian English poetry. As a poetess, she is bold, frank but controversial in life and literature. She has made an immense contribution to the growth of Indian English poetry. As a poetess, she differs from other Indo-English poets because of her attitude and philosophy of life, which is conventional unorthodox. A cursory survey of her poetry reveals that she is candid, dauntless and, expresses what she wishes to write. Her poetry is spontaneous and an explosive expression of female longing and aspiration. It is a fact that in her writing, Indian English has acquired for itself a real substance that matches equally with the creative contributions of the Western confessionalists like Sylvia Plath and Anee Sexton of the present. Kamala Das projects herself as a fervent feminist poetic voice always exacting for a dignified place of harrowing situations of feminine experiences to a longing for the freedom of inner self through experiencing consummate love in the interpersonal relationships. She culminates her poetic acumen with the note of a forced reconciliation, a realization of the pathetic nature of human situation and existence. In her poetry, Kamala Das makes a categorical introspective exposition of an average woman in the process of her growth and development under oppressive and humiliating circumstances in Indian traditional society. She speaks very openly without caring a fig for the ancient conventional and orthodox man-made boundaries.

Kamala Das writes about herself and the subject-matter of her poetry is her personal experiences. From the beginning she demonstrates a continuity of theme and expression concerning central division of the self of her work; it is a compelling account of the spirit of the present. She speaks out her heart at her own premises. Redefines herself and liberates herself both as a woman and poet. Though she struggles to cope with her problems and dilemmas, she does not try to intellectualize or spiritualize them. She makes a discovery of human existence and passionately narrates her experiences. She rejects all the restrictions which the male-dominated society imposes on women. Her poetry must be viewed in the light of her feminine consciousness. She acquires their consciousness under hostile circumstances dependent upon the society. As a poetess, she is conscious of her creative faculties and tries to break chains and restraints. She indulges in self-awareness, self-exposure and self-introspection in order to define herself poetically. The aim of the a poet is never do self-exposure but self-discovery and self-examination in order to search her identity as a woman and as a poet. In the crowded worlds of men and women she finds herself alone.

Kamala Das' poetry originates from the expression of the self which works like a poetic nucleus. An evaluation and analysis of her poetic output reveals that the woman persona in her poems represents her own mutilated self which is tormented by both past and present and ends up in deep crisis. She feels cheated and exploited by the civilization of which she is part. Her community, family and civilization expect her to perform the role of a temptress, the goddess and the child and a mother. She has no respect for the culture which has made use of her. She is against the



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double standard which is meted out to the women with partiality, and the same things which are taken to be taboos for woman, are only reserved for men as a privilege.

Kamala Das writes with the frankness and openness unusual in the Indian context. Most Indian poets in English lag behind in the race of candour with Kamala Das as far as creatively analyzing and evaluating the experiences are concerned. Just as the American confessional poets such Sylvia Plath and Anee Sexton, Kamala Das exploits the confessional style for discovering the images that evoke the joy and frustration of achieved womanhood. According to ML Rosenthal and Sally M. Goll, "The artistic problem is to make a genuine poetry out of the language of untrammelled self-awareness." (The Modern Poetic Sequence 393)

Kamala Das writes in the style of confessional writers as well as he indulges in a great deal of heart caring. The poetry never reaches a stage of sickness and breakdown but in her morbid moods, Kamala Das often comes close to the more pathological states of confessional poets when she steers clear of self-pity on the one hand, and the exhibitionism on the other. She is profoundly moving and the loneliness and despair come through. Self-pity and exhibitionism are somewhat unpoetic but solitariness and despair are poetic; Kamala Das seems to be profound in making alienation and despair come through.

In maximum number of her poems Kamala Das explores the gender roles of Indian woman – the embarrassment they involve, the resistance they provoke, and the pain they cause. This style of confessional poetry in Kamala Das is a dramatization of the self, to place itself in focus with itself. The confessional style becomes a sort of device to formalize the problems that crop up from arranged marriage at an early age. She owns in *My Study*, the autobiography, that frustrations, doubts, and anxieties in her life have been the result of her early marriage.

The theme of love is one of the prominent features of Kamala Das' confessional poetry. The desperate obsession and failure to arrive at love leaves her in the claustrophobic world of the self, the wounded self. *The Freaks*, *The Old Playhouse*, *An Introduction*, *The Looking Glass* etc are the poems in which the wounded self, which has to struggle hard to achieve its own identity, is not only the controlling theme but the principle of organization as such. Erotic indulgence keeps the self within the orbit of a relationship without making it lament over its wounds. Isolation leads to despair through fear. In *The Freaks* the speaker says:

Who can  
Help us who has lived so long  
And have failed in love? The heart,  
An empty cistern, waiting  
Through long hours, fills itself  
With coiling snakes of silence...  
I am freak. (The Freaks 35)

The speaker says that she is a freak and the freakishness is an internalization of the speaker's urgently felt need to save her face.

Kamala Das' poem *Old Playhouse* is a key to her dialectical attitude to the debate which is mostly patriarchal helping the reader in knowing himself/herself to the poetess' complex calculation of lust and love. The central image of the poem is found in its very title indicating that this theme of love has converted her mind on *Old Playhouse* while all the lights have been put out. The self of the lover is almost blocked and checked and that the lover finds himself in complete darkness of the emotions. The lover is a deliberate tactician who has the quality of taming a free bird; his plan gets success making the bird forget her nature i.e. the desire to fly in the fresh air of blue sky. Contrary to this, the male ego becomes responsible for reducing her to the level of a dwarf. The beloved's contact with the body of the lover makes her realize that her body is no more an asset of her rather it has become a liability to her.

In her poem *Of Calcutta*, Kamala Das treats the theme of gender roles as well as the wounded self of a woman. At one point, she provides a reference to her residing place as 'My Husband's Home' where she stays like a 'trained circus dog' and loses the touch with her soul and spirit asking where her soul and spirit had gone for she had lost all her desires. This articulation with her creative urge makes her a great poet, for in the process she learns how to follow a confessional mode.

In her another important poem *An Introduction* Kamala Das presents herself to be absolutely aware of the self hinting at the fact that she has got success in lending an adequate linguistic medium to her poetry. She develops her own Indian-English idiom, an idiom which can recapture most successfully what the writer 'feels' in her own language. She creates for herself a style which reflects both her Indian and feminine sensibility. The poem has double theme, it has the language of identity and the identity of a woman as a woman. It begins with a statement:

I don't know politics but I know the names  
Of those in power, and can repeat them like  
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru.  
I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,  
I speak three languages, write in Two, dream in one.  
Don't write in English, they said, English is  
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave  
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,  
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in  
Any language I like? The language I speak,  
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses  
All mine, mine alone.  
It is half English, half Indian, funny

perhaps, but it is honest,  
It is as human as I am human,  
don't You see? (An Introduction  
Lines 1-15)

In the lines mentioned above, we find a combination of a strongly felt need to confess and to communicate through the presentation of a mild sort of irritation and anxiety over the medium of articulation. The presentation of honesty of the self and the spirit of inquiring mind's integrity in thought, feeling and creation are responsible for the success of the confessional poet and Kamala Das brings this quality in her poetry to the full; she is very much present in her poems. She very emphatically and without any irony remarks about English language:

It is human speech, the speech of  
the mind that is  
Here and not there, a mind that  
sees and hears and  
Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech  
Of trees in storm or of monsoon  
clouds or of rain or the  
Incoherent muttering of the blazing  
Funeral pyre. (An Introduction  
Lines 18-24)

The speaker, here, wants to bring home the idea that she has a mind that sees, and hears, and is aware. What Kamla Das means to say that the task of a poet is to find a linguistic structure and a frame of reference to communicate what he or she sees, hears and is aware of. This creative mode of the poetess shows that she, as a married woman, has the confession of her experiences without knowing exactly what marriage is, and what it demands from her as a woman:

I was a child, and later they  
Told me I grew, for I became tall,  
my limbs  
Swelled and one or two places  
sprouted hair.  
When I asked for love, not knowing  
what else to ask  
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into  
the  
Bedroom and closed the door. He  
did not beat me  
But my sad woman-body felt so  
beaten. (Lines 24-30)

Kamala Das' frank confession here highlights the fact that her early marriage has given a rude jolt to her sensibility as a woman. The 'he' of the poem does not injure her, but her 'sad woman-body felt so beaten' speaks openly of the torture a woman bears because of her early marriage. It is a very insulting experience for a woman because her body seems to stand in the way of establishing her identity. And so to revive her self from the insulting experience, she changes her dress, wears a shirt and trousers, cut her hair short and finally ignores her womanliness. Members of the patriarchal society takes this behaviour of the woman as a rebellion against their dominance:

Dress in sarees, be girl  
Be wife, they said, be embroiderer,  
be cook,

Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in.  
Oh,  
Belong, cried the categorizers.  
Don't sit  
On wall 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, a role. (Lines 35-  
41)

Kamala Das here satirizes, though with a mild tone, the male attitude and the conventional gender role assigned to a woman in terms of do's and don'ts. But in the coming lines she presents the mild protest of a woman who very much wishes to have her own identity:

I met a man, loved him. Call  
Him not by any name, he is  
everyman  
Who wants a woman, just as I am  
every  
Woman who seeks love. In  
him...the hungry haste  
Of rivers, in me...the oceans'  
tireless'  
Waiting. Who are you, I ask each  
and everyone,  
The answer is, it is I. Anywhere  
and,  
Everywhere, I see the one who calls  
himself I  
In this world, he is tightly packed  
like the  
Sword in its sheath. It is I who drink  
lonely  
Darinks 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. I have no joys that are  
not yours, no  
Aches which are not yours. I too call  
myself I. (Lines 45-61)

The concluding section of the poem brings to the surface the problem of a woman's identity, the male identity is everywhere taken for granted as suggested by the phrase "sword in its sheath". The poem ends with the enumeration of unconventional roles a woman is not expected to play by categorizers. This search for identity in woman alienates her from the society. Commenting on the theme of isolation of woman in confessional poetry, Deborah Pope observes:

In modern confessional poetry, as  
an extension of the Adamic  
tradition, the stance of everyman is  
readily available to the male poet. It  
is expected that personally  
alienated and desperate as his

**Shrinkhla Ek Shodhparak Vaicharik Patrika**

voice may be, it is still the voice of his time. By articulating the personal psychoses of his experience, he is...simultaneously relaying the social fabric of this world. Yet, for the female confessional poet, there is not the same extension; she is not every man and is hardly every woman. Her experience only serves to reinforce her sense of isolation and freakishness. She cannot even believe in a solidarity or community the other woman. Although in a very real sense male confessional poets do bespeak trauma of their times, poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton remain individual 'Crazy Woman.' (A Separate Vision: Isolation in contemporary Women's Poetry 6-7)

However, in Kamala Das' poetry, we find that the experience of alienation comes up on the surface i.e. externalized. In her poem *The Looking Glass* she goes on to advise women that they should be alert in the matters of love; she tries to convince women that their weakness lies in their body which has its own needs:

Oh yes, getting  
A man to love is easy, but living  
Without him afterwards may have to  
be  
Faced. A living without life when  
you move  
Around, meeting strangers, with  
your eyes that  
Gave up thir search, with ears that  
hear only  
His last voice calling out your name  
and your  
Body which once under his touch  
had gleamed  
Like burnished brass, now drab and  
destitute. (The Looking Glass Lines  
16-24)

Kamala Das tries to point out that the female body seems to make her a victim of male domination which is not acceptable. The anatomical images found in the poem show her intrinsic hatred of body for it

limits the horizon of the self. From the feministic point of view, it cannot be said that she wants women's emancipation from male domination, however, as a confessional poetess, she seriously expresses her concern for her own identity as a woman.

**Aim of the Study**

Kamala Das, the great Indian poetess, shows the Male dominating society in her poetry. At every step of life a woman is oppressing by Male candidates. So I decided to write about bold and Frank thoughts of Kamala Das.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, it can be said that in her poetry Kamala Das has written in a confessional mode the experiences she has gone through her personal life. She has laid bare the anguished soul of the oppressed women in male oriented society. KN Daruwalla rightly opines:

The intensity of feeling, ably controlled in her better poems, and the uninhibited manner in which she treated sex, immediately won for her a big audience. Kamala Das is pre-eminently a poet of love and pain, one stalking the other through a near neurotic world. There is an all pervasive sense of hurt throughout. Love the lazy anima hungers of the flesh, hurt and humiliation are the warp and woof of her poetic fabric. She seldom ventures outside this personal world. (Two Decades of Indian Poetry 147)

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