

Confessionalism in the Poetry of Kamala Das

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Confessional poetry or “Confessionalism” is a style of poetry that emerged in the United States during the 1950s. It is sometimes also classified as a form of Post modernism. It has been described as poetry of the personal or “I”, focusing on extreme moments of individual experience, the psyche, and personal trauma. The confessional poetry is the poetry of introspection, self-analysis, self-expression and private life, and unravels those facets of life which an ordinary man, though that person is a poet, would keep strictly to himself/herself because of the intricate nature of those facets. A confessional poet has to shed all of his/her reservations and to write straightforwardly, and in an unequivocal manner, thus flouting the restrictions and restraints which the social/ethical code and the customs of society foist upon him/her. Kamala Das is primarily a confessional poet, and in this context, she may be regarded as a remarkable Indo-Anglian poet comparable to the American poets such as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath

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Introduction

In the second half of the twentieth century a group of American poets started writing on a highly subjective matter. Expression of personality without escape bloomed in the poems. The emotional content appears personal rather than impersonal. In the narrative content the protagonist seems to be unbalanced, afflicted or alienated. This group of poets includes Robert Lowell, John Barryman, W.D. Snodgrass, Theodore Roethke, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath to establish the confessional pattern in poetry. The new poets in India writing in English initiated their voice in poetry in a manner that resembled with that pattern. They used the ‘self’ as a poetic symbol around which hover a personal mythology. Among them Kamala Das excels the position. She started writing in open form and in open language. Her poetry especially displays moral courage with anti establishment in content and alienation in common theme.

Kamala Das is a revolutionary poet who started the trend towards frankness and candor in the treatment of a subject which was almost taboo and which women poets particularly hesitated to deal with. She is thus a trend setter and the trend started by her has now become almost vogue. She has criticized the tradition bound conservative society which of course, was always harsh on her unconventional lifestyle. Her poetry highlights the miseries of forlorn women and the treatment meted out to her in a male dominated society. Controversies became the constant companion of her poetic achievements. The candid disclosure of her personal life in her poetry gave opportunity to critics to label her poetry as “erotic” and “sexy”. Her love poetry is unconventional and shocking to the orthodox conservative community because of her frank and uninhibited treatment of sexual love and the human body. Most of her poems are based on the theme of love amorousness and

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sexuality. The female persona in her poems yearns for pleasures and emotional warmth beyond sexual gratification.

.....Can't this man with
Nimblefinger-tipsunleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hungers. (The Freaks)

Kamala Das thought herself to be one of the victims of the prevalent orthodox attitude towards Indian women and of male domination over them. Having personally experienced what she thought to be her husband's ill treatment of her and of his cruel neglect of her feminine needs, she could not help giving vent to her grievances in her poems. She expresses the vehemence of her emotions and her resentments. She made her poetry a vehicle for the expression of resentments against her grievances against all male because of her sad and bitter experience of her indiscriminant sexual relationship with a large number of men. She strives to establish her identity as a woman through her poems and she, in fact, tried also to impact an identity to Indian women as a neglected class of Indian society. She writes:

you let me
toss my youth like coins
into various hands, you let me
mate with shadows,
You let me sing in empty
shrines, you let your wife
Seek ecstasy in other's arms.

(A Man is a Season)

As a confessional poet she mostly confines herself to the reasons of her own experience. By doing so she becomes very frank and honest, close and intimate in her details. She hardly ever writes about 'old, unhappy, far-off things', as Wordsworth and his band of followers did. That's why 'confessional' poetry sounds so appealing and so convincing. The poet's failure in love is displayed clearly in the poem "My Grandmother's House".

who have lost My way and beg now at strangers' doors to Receive love, at least in small change?

As Kamala Das is devoid of getting emotional attachment from her husband, that's why she keeps relationship with many unknown persons to get pure love. Such a confessional attitude of Kamala Das has heightened her universal appeal. Her hollow marital relationship comes under fire in the poem "Captive":

My love is an empty gift, a glided
Empty container,
good for show nothing else.

"Composition" brings to the fore
rotteness of her love pranks. In it she states:
To be frank I have failed.

I fill my age and my Uselessness.

Kamala Das was totally dissatisfied in her marital life as she was deprived of getting love and affection, so she expresses her view in a melancholic condition. In the poem "The Old Play House", her depressed psychology has been mentioned:

There No more singing, no more dance, my
mind is an old Playhouse with all its lights put
out. Kamala's poems show us that she is every
woman, who seeks love. She is the beloved and
the betrayed, expressing her endless female hunger.
A confessional poet often writes about death in
disease and destruction. Kamala also has written
number poems on decay, disease and death. The
confessional poets are in love with death for they
fail to see the harmony between the inner and the
outer life or the body and the soul. This is how
Kamala expresses the same feelings in a poem
called "The Suicide":

O sea, I am fed up
I want to be simple
I want to be loved
And
If love is not to be had,
I want to be dead, just dead

Kamala Das has a style of her own. Her language is simple but the tone is very emphatic and full of assertion. Love is her favourite theme. She is frank, honest and forthright in describing different kinds of experiences in her poetry.

Like many poems, "Punishment in Kindergarten" is an autobiographical poem of Kamala Das. The poetess in this poem recounts her picnic to Victoria Gardens when she was a girl child in the kindergarten. All the children were playing and making merry except Kamala Das. But she alone kept away from the company of the children. Their teacher, a blue frocked woman, reprimanded her saying:

Why don't you join the others, what A peculiar child you are!

This admonished remark of the teacher was heard by other children who were sipping sugar cane and laughed. Kamala as a sensitive child felt it very much. She was very sad at the words of the teacher. But the laughter by the children made her sadder. She thought that they should have sympathized her rather than laughing and insulting her. Filled with sorrow and shame she hid her face in a hedge and wept. This was indeed a painful experience to a little child in the nursery school. Now after many years she has grown into an adult. She has only a faint memory of the blue frocked woman and the laughing faces of the children. Now she has learned to have an 'adult peace' and happiness in her present state as a grown up person. Now there is no need for her to be perturbed about that bitter kindergarten experience. With her long experience in life she has learned that life is a mixture of joy and sorrow. She remembers how she has experienced both the joy and sorrow of life. The long passage of time has many things. She is no more a lonely individual as she used to feel when she hid her face in the hedge, watching the steel white sun that was standing lonely in the sky.

"Punishment in Kindergarten" is written in three stanzas, each having different number of lines

– the first with seven lines, the second with six and the third with nine. Like many English Romantic poems, this poem does not follow any regular rhyme scheme. The theme of the poem can be categorized into two parts, the first of which being the description of the painful experience of the kindergarten/school days and the second, Kamala's adult attitude to the incident at present when she is no more a child. She seems to be nostalgic about her childhood days. There are certain expressions in the poem that are worth remembering. The poet says that the child buried its face in the hedge and "smelt the flowers and the pain". "Smelt the flowers can be taken as an ordinary expression, but "smelt the pain" is something very evocative expressive. In the first stanza of the poem, the poet describes the pain caused to the child, "throwing words like pots and pans". This again is beautiful. The phrase used by the poet to describe the child's teacher, namely, "blue frocked woman" can be justified from the child's point of view. But to the poet who is an adult the use of the phrase looks a little to awkward. On the whole, the poem can be taken as the poet's interest in remembering her childhood days. The tone of Kamala Das' poetry is distinctively feminine. She is a confessional and autobiographical poet who writes about her own experiences of frustration in love and drudgery in married life. In one of her best poems "Summer in Calcutta" she candidly writes about her first sexual encounter with man. All her famous poems such as "The Testing of Sirens", "My Grandmother's House", "The Descendants", and "Looking Glass" are confessional in character. She expresses over the deep loss of female identity in the presence of domineering male. She craves for liberty. In "The Old Playhouse" she boldly and straightforwardly reveals tension in man-woman relationship, the inadequacy of love and intolerable sexual tyranny and subjugation. Kamala Das in her poems communicate a powerful female sensibility which does not find expression in the male counterpart poets.

Conclusion:

Poetry arrived in the life of Kamala Das as an escape from her own sufferings and frustrations. She made the best use of her poetic talent. "Kamala has to her credit honesty, daresness, courage to speak the truth without self pity she announces every bit of her experiences, her sufferings, sorrow, expectations, non fulfillment of desires". Kamala Das did not have to borrow themes from others' sources, events, situations, as all her work. Whatever she got from life, she fed it on the paper to the readers with stern honesty, truthfulness, sincerity and happiness. She never tried to pretend boost or manipulate any emotion, fact or information for anyone's pleasure or comfort. From the very early age whatever excerpts of memory she can collect she shared them with her readers without any hesitations. At the age of six, she had written poems on dolls that had lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity. This symbolizes a kind of fear of loss of identity and selfhood in the chaos of worldly crowd dispatching respective worldly affairs.

Throughout her life Kamala Das wrote for the cause of woman, her liberation, her individuality, her separate identity from her male counterpart. In her works the male characters are sketched and studied with respect to the female protagonists. Depression, prolonged illness and deteriorating health even could not stop her and make her devoid of, from the strength of fighting up for femininity. She also questioned the various duties assigned to women in the name of family. She was not very eager to accept the fact that she has to do all the house nuances like cooking, cleaning, washing, maintaining the house, looking after the children; make love to her husband, "licking" his feet like a dog and that all. Her soul aches to submit to these humbler works as she considered herself to be useful for more important works that can in a way or other be helpful to

society. She hated to be an 'object' of lust and comfort for men in her life.

Like other confessional poets, such as Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, Emily Bronte, Hilda Doolittle, and Maya Angelou, Kamala Das makes her own life, her personal emotional experiences, disillusionment and frustrations the centre of her poetry. As a confessional poet she depicts with phenomenal frankness the wrongs, exploitation, oppression and humiliation that she endured/faced in the male dominated society. Sexual humiliation and exploitation is one of the main subjects of her writings. Her poems beautifully describe how she fails to incorporate/blend the inner and outer, the body and the soul. Kamala Das frankly writes about love, sex, failures, frustrations, marital relations, extramarital sex, emotional sterility etc. She is considered one of the first Indo-English poets who adopted the method of confessionalism in her poetry.

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