

Quest for Female Identity in Kamala Das

Tarun D. Rawal
Research Scholar,
Shri JYT University, Rajasthan.

Kamala Das herself introduces her in the poem “An Introduction”:

“I am an Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages, write in two, and dream in one.”

In literary world Kamala Das is mainly known as **a poet** in Indian writing in English but she is also **a writer of fiction**. Though she wrote most short stories in Malayalam, her mother tongue, she has written a few short stories in English. Das has certainly studied Victorian models and accepted sex and sensuality as an integral part. Many of her poems are suffused with warmth and passion, with heat of an **unrequited love and desire**. She is one of the best-known contemporary Indian writers. Writing in two languages, English and Malayalam, she has authored many autobiographical works and novels, several well received collections of poetry in English, numerous volumes of short stories, and essays on a broad spectrum of subjects.

The present paper pays a pointed attention to the comprehensive genius of Kamala Das as reflected in her poetry, short stories, short fiction and short novel- all marching towards **a quest for female identity**.

Kamala Das as a confessional poet

The field of Postcolonial studies has gained prominence since the 1970s. Post colonialism in Indian literature has been the continual shaking off of the old skin of Western thought and emergence of new consciousness and cognizance, critique and celebration. And with this new awareness, comes the concept of self-expression. The confessional poetry of the mid-twentieth century dealt with subject matter that earlier had not been openly discussed in American poetry. In this type of poetry, private experiences with and feelings about death, trauma, depression and relationships were aggressed often in an autobiographical manner.

The confessional poets were not only recording their emotions on paper; craft and construction were extremely important to their work. It is a branch of modern poetry. There is no place either for religion or morals in this poetry. The poet does not expect any redemption or retribution as there is no remorse. It is just that they bear their soul to get a psychic relief. It is of some therapeutic value.

Kamala Das was barely six when she started writing poetry. There is a vivid description of her childhood days in her autobiographical novel ‘My Story’. She wrote tragic poems about her dolls that lost their heads and limbs and confesses that “each poem of mine made me cry.” She is well known for her bold and forthright expression. An acute obsession with love and the use of the confessional mode form the prominent feature of her writing.

Kamala Das published six volumes of poetry between 1965 and 1985. She tells of intensely personal experiences, including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in

and outside of marriage, and her life in matriarchal rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home. Das's early poetry praised its fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice, they lamented that it lacked attention to structure and craftsmanship.

In 'An Introduction,' Das wrote in free verse in a colloquial style that seems to follow writer's thoughts. The poem presents in a frank and bold manner glimpses of the poet's life, her feelings and thoughts. The Introduction also triggers off a process of introspection and self-discovery in the mind of the writer. For at the end of the poem, Das realizes her essential identity with womankind. Finally the poem is an expression of the poet's craving for love and of the sense of frustration and deprivation that arise on being denied it. These themes recur in Das's verse.

"It is I who drink lonely Drinks at twelve midnight, in hotels of strange towns, it is I who laugh, 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 which are not yours, no Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I."

The poetry of Das must be viewed in the light of her feminine consciousness. As a poet, she is conscious of her creative faculties and tries to break chains and restraints. She indulges in self-awareness, self-exploration and self introspection in order to define herself poetically. She finds herself condemned to play the part, apart from her feminine self. It is the male society which compels her to choose her roles according to her convenience. She is forced to act either as a slave or an idol. Her personality reflects the worse condition of women.

Quest for Identity through love

The main feature of all Kamala Das's writing seems to be her desperate obsession with love. Das establishes herself firmly as a desiring female subject searching for love in a world that rarely understands her. To her, womanhood involves certain collective experiences. A marriage of convenience which is still a thriving system in our society was a bitter experience for kamala Das.

Her fictional autobiography *My Story* reveals that her poems are indeed an intense study of their personal traumas and tribulations that she faced in her married life bereft of her emotional bonding. However, her poems are not just confessions but the vigorous voicing of her female identity.

My Story focuses on the central ambivalence in a woman's situation and identity. From the beginning Das demonstrates a continuity of theme and expression concerning the central quest for a search for an identity. She speaks out her heart on her own premises. She redefines and liberates herself both as a woman and as a poet. She rejects masks and roles and refuses to accept the limitations of her biology.

When Das speaks of love outside marriage, she is not really recommending adultery, but merely searching for a relationship which gives both love and identity and accepting as a woman and it is her right. A study of her psychic geography traces her journey from the physical to the spiritual. She struggles to free herself from the lure of the body and seeks redemption in Lord Krishna, a bodiless form.

Love to her does not mean physical fulfillment or sexual satisfaction, but the union of minds. To quote her words, "I had expected him (My husband) to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be, and my mother. I wanted conversations, companion and warmth. Sex was far from my thoughts."

Kamala Das is in search of love. Finding no fulfillment from her wedded husband, she goes in search of knocking at "strangers" doors to receive love" ("My Grand Mother's House", Summer in Calcutta 15) but she finds only lust in them. However, she at other time, feels being back under the sheltering wings of her husband. Any study of Kamala Das as a love poet should not preclude this trait of her character.

In no sense can Das call this skin-communicated thing love. She poses a question to her sisterhood, "Woman, is the happiness, this lying buried beneath a woman?"

Interior journey through the maze of relationships

Kamala Das makes an interior journey into her short stories and explores the territory of longing and yearning of women. A Doll for the Child Prostitute is a captivating short novel, a combination of the innocent and erotic. The short story titled "Iqbal" (A Doll 88-92) deals with the poignant situation in a woman's life wedded to a man who has had homosexual relationship with his friend. "A Little Kitten" (A Doll 65-67) another short story spells out the marital disharmony in the life of a woman who because of negated affection from her husband seeks love from another. The story "The Sign of the Lion" (A Doll 88-92) dramatizes the protagonist's sexual aspirations or a psychological projection of the ego of her personality with a certain fulfillment in relationship with her husband.

"The Young Man with a Pitted Face" (A Doll 58-60) is a sentimental short story. It deals with the contrast between a woman who wants passionate identification with the man and the man who wants to have his fulfillment with her in her flesh in her youth and health but who wants to throw her away as she is dying, as she will not be physically useful to him.

The story "December" (A Doll 61-63) shows a woman poet's passionate attachment to the man she loves. The story begins with a convalescing lady-love accompanying her young lover to his room. She willingly participates in the love game. In his company she enjoys consummation and experiences endless joy.

Kamala Das's poetry and stories represent her liberated mind and view. Her poetry is characterized by loneliness. It is one feature of existentialism; we come across it in the image of the sun, the sea, the noon, night and so on. The characters are presented not as the constituents of a semi side of life but as actual left over's of a male world that has sought its pleasure and left them dry and useless. However, her woman emerges from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual freedom and identity.

Existential Loneliness and Death Instinct

She writes in 'My Story': "Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to get rid of my loneliness which is not unique in any way but is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements."

The symbolic use of the 'sea' indicates her emotional restfulness and sad mood, reciting the self's confessional sense of melting and disintegration into nothingness. The sea becomes a safeguard for the time ridden existence and tormented psyche. The 'sea' throughout her second volume functions as an objective correlative for peace. Here Das faces two psychic traumas. One her feminine self wants to be attached with 'body's wisdom', and the second, her poetic self wants to gain the total vision of life by being detached from the earlier. She is unable to reconcile because between the two there always remains a gap.

Throughout a long span of her life Das had been playing with trivialities and frivolities of a self centered mind. It becomes clear from the lines of the same poem, 'I asked my husband, am I hetro, Am I Lesbian?' Here, her feminine self is going through a peculiar problem of 'to be or not to be.' Her poetic self wants to rise above the trivialities but, her ego-self does not want to give them up.

Das considers death a reward for all her pains in surviving upon the earth. Her autobiography gives ample evidences to her idea of death by water, drowning oneself into the sea. The relevant passage reads thus:

“Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of
My loneliness which is not unique in any way, but is natural to all.
I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements.”

Mythical Framework

Throughout her multi various relationships, the poet is in quest of her spiritual paramour, the eternal companion of the soul, Lord Krishna. In My Story, she states, “My mate is He. He shall come to me in myriad shapes. In many shapes shall I surrender to this desire?” (197) She progresses towards a transcendence of the lusts of the body. She has gone out of her marital ambit: “Perhaps I lost my way, perhaps I went astray.”

Kamala Das introduces a mythical framework of her longing in the poem “Radha” where she worships her ideal lover Lord Krishna. She expresses her inner longings. She finds an objective correlative for her own and identifies herself with Radha in search of Lord Krishna. She has become mad in love for all that is beyond body – beyond the flesh. The transformation has taken place in her attitude in life and her vision.

Conclusion

Kamala Das writes in her usual, frank open-mindedness, about married life or man-woman relationship in many of her poems. She frequently complains about man's callousness and wantonness and woman's suffering on that count. These confessional poems are intensely personal, highly subjective. There's no 'persona' in her poems. The themes are nakedly embarrassing and focus exclusively upon the pain, anguish and ugliness of life at the expense of pleasure and beauty. It is a continuous search for female identity which seeks redemption in her Lord Krishna, a bodiless form.

Works Cited:

- 1 Das, Kamala, *My Story*, New Delhi: Sterling Publisher, 1977.
- 2 Das, Kamal, *A Doll for the Child Prostitute and Other Stories*. New Delhi: India Paperback, 1979.
- 3 Chavan, Sunanda, P. *The Fair Voice: A Study of Indian Women in English*, New Delhi: Sterling Publisher, 1984.