

Kamala Das's Poetry: An Instrument to Counter Gender Based Violence in a Patriarchal Society

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Abstract

We are well acquainted with Kamala Das (1934-2009) as an Indian Writer of English. In her literary works, specifically in her poems, she has raised her voice to protest various forms of male domination over women, of which she was a victim, too. And not only in poems but literally in every possible literary genre, she has posted her protesting nature to counter the practice of domestic violence in our society. In postcolonial India, she is perhaps the first woman writer in Indian Writing in English to have a feminine outlook. And this is the lesser-known fact that she also contested the assembly election in 1984. Though she lost this election, this is noteworthy that she stepped out of her comfort zone as a writer. Physically she reached out to her voters and let them know that her sole aim in fighting that election was to educate women and provide shelter for homeless women. In my paper, I will endeavor to locate Das's above-quoted voice in her works with particular reference to her poems and to analyze her way of addressing general woman's trauma in the light of her personal experience.

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence, Feminism, Indian Writing In English, Confessional Poems.

In the second chapter, titled "The Park Street Home," of her famous autobiography "My Story," Kamala Das gives a vivid description of her mother, Balamani Amma (1909-2004), a celebrated poet of Kerala. In this description, she makes it clear that her mother's married life was not a comfortable one. Das's father, a stern follower of Mahatma Gandhi, didn't allow his newlywed wife to wear "... anything but Khaddar and preferable white or off-white" (11). And after the wedding, Das's mother was forced to remove "... all the gold ornaments from her person, all except the 'mangal sutra'" (11). And not only was she scared of this new man in her life, but some other male members of her own family were also acting in the same manner. At that time, Das's family from her mother's side was a matrilineal one; the newlywed bride had to succumb to her husband's patriarchal domination. And the result was obvious, "My mother did not fall in love with my father. They were dissimilar and mismatched" (11). This episode could begin another familiar story of domestic violence. But Das's mother rather chose to remain silent for the time being. Das continues, "But my mother's timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied the relatives and friends" (11). However, she

continued to write even after that, and later she won prestigious awards like Sahitya Akademi, Saraswati Samman, and Padma Bhusan.

I've started my paper with this episode to express at the outset that gender-based violence, which is the sole topic of discussion, can be noticed from a different perspective. The position of women in the patriarchal social system doesn't spare a woman like Das's mother, who is hailed from a prestigious family in Kerala. And whatever her husband does cannot be generally categorized as an act of cruel violence like physical torture etc. But this forceful suppression of self or any woman's personality can equally be treated as having the nature of gross inhumanity. Kamala Das writes her autobiography "My Story" mainly to pay hospital bills. But at the same time, she found an opportunity to bring out various episodes of evil practices inflicted on her. And while writing this autobiography, she can relate to other women who have been suffering the same plight as her.

On the other hand, her life or any individual woman's life can be considered identical to every woman's life story. So when we read Das's life, we can assume that we'll be witnessing bad attitudes practiced by male-dominated society toward other women, too. And in this paper, it'll be my endeavor to show how Kamala Das, through her writing, especially poetry, can break down existing social power structures and ultimately acquire a position for herself in the world of masculine hierarchies. When she feels that, like other women in this system, her role has also

been marginalized, she tries to challenge this system by only means of writing the self. The 'self' appears almost in every section of her literary works. Particularly in the genre of poems, she has established the Indian School of Confessional Poetry, which she continues as a counterpart of the American Confessional School. She finds out that writing is an instrument to counter gender-based violence. Her tone has also been emphasized by another feminist writer Rosalind Brackenbury:

Nobody writes in a vacuum, away from the political and social structures in which we live. We breathe the air of today's thought; we digest it in everything we read and consider and create it. This is essentially the role of women today; to create, present and consider a new world. (56).

And Rosalind's remark is rightfully apt when we see Kamala Das has done the same thing in her literary career. As if she knows that writing plays a vital role in forming our observations of our lives as women. Throughout her academic career, she tried to break down the hierarchy of a male-dominated system where the 'pen' is supposed to be the phallic symbol and thereby owns males. As she says in a poem, "I have / Come, yes, with hunger, with faith and/ A secret language/All ready to be used" (Mitra411), she makes her intention clear that she has created a 'secret language' which is very much a woman's language. She further declares that she doesn't want to "search for pretty words which dilute the

truth" (Mitra411). So, she is after the 'truth' which has been suppressed and subjugated by the conventional patriarchal social system for ages. And this 'truth' will debunk the myth that in the traditional system, women are capable of enjoying the same comfort shared by their male counterparts.

On the contrary, how unsafe they feel even when they are in their place. Das is after this 'revelation' that will bring to the forefront the suppressed trauma of women. Undoubtedly, her writings are nothing but her personal life blatantly brought out to the readers. But somehow, a woman's experiences can be considered a part of the collected experiences of all women. She is the representative of every suffering woman. As if she puts a voice in their silent and almost inanimate existence. Shirley Geok-lin Lim has rightly mentioned the same in her seminal essay, "Terms of Empowerment in Kamala Das's *My Story*": Kamala Das, being an active agent, endows upon herself the responsibility of creating awareness among readers. As if she wants to disturb this society. In her poems, she prepares the face to meet the faces of patriarchs. As if she, silently but steadily, prepares for a duel to counter gender discrimination.

Like her mother, her own life is also affected by gender-based violence. She was, too, married at a very tender age to an aged person. Even before her marriage, just after the engagement, her father forced her to meet her 'fiancé'. And that meeting filled her heart with an utter distaste for her future husband. From those initial days, the bitter cruelty of her husband was noticeable. To a girl of tender age, such sexual approaches

are sexual abuses. Both mentally and physically, she has been hurt. In her poems, she has made such references. As in "The Freaks," she is eager to meet her lover with a loveable heart which is being muddled by the physical approaches made by her friend:

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. (59)

In her later life, Das is never against enjoying sexual pleasure, but the same should arise out of the two willing minds. In this poem, the pair is mismatched. And she regrets:

Can this man with
Nimble finger-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hunger?(59).

This doesn't happen only to her. There are many instances around us where economically weaker and physically feeble women become victims of male lust and subsequently suffer. Das mirrors their plight in her writings as if she is trying to give that set of women back their lost voices. She finds it her responsibility to take care of this issue and makes her poems a strategic weapon to resist males' unwelcome approach. That might be why her poems

often appear to us as a container of suppressed aggression which is not deemed suitable for her to satisfy every section of readers. K Satchidananda has pertinently laid down the same argument:

This is not to say that Kamala's poetry transcends gendered subjectivity altogether by resorting to some grand, Tagorean, universal discourse. She does refuse to be "the invisible woman in the asylum corridor" or the 'silent woman' robbed of all expression; she too is a female Prometheus, one of the volumes *de langue* (thieves of language) with a manifesto of desire that seeks to escape the paradox of being a prisoner of the hegemonic patriarchal discourse she despises... ("Only Soul Knows..."17).

For a proper understanding of her position and subsequent eagerness to become the 'Prometheus,' we can continue to delve into Das's marital life and search for those occasions which make her life deplorable. In her celebrated autobiography *My Story*, there is a chapter titled "The Brutality of Sex" where she has blatantly revealed her intimate experiences as a newly married wife. She narrates:

This particular incident she has mentioned as "rape" (72) in her memoir. She continues, "Again and again through that unhappy night he hurt me ... By morning I could barely move my limbs..." (72). She

has made a frank confession repeatedly about her intimate personal life. Another biography of her, written by Merrily Weisbord, a Canadian-based writer, while Weisbord Das is interviewing her, reveals her husband's homosexual nature. On one of her birthdays, her husband comes home with his boyfriend. She continues:

(They) shoved me out of the bedroom and locked themselves in. I stood for a while, wondering what two men could do together to get some physical rapture, but after some time, my pride made me move away. I went to my son and lay near him. I felt then hatred for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound, the soul's wound showing through. (15)

This sheer rejection makes Das frigid and regressive towards her husband. And this is not something with which her husband satisfies himself. Physical torture continues:

Every night this digging went on and on, and I almost thought he was burying a body every night. No tenderness there was. No preliminaries, nothing. Probably he couldn't love me. At the moment of sexual intercourse with him, I wished he would gather me in his arms after the act. Had he caressed my face or

touched my belly, I would not have felt the intense rejection after each union. Then again, he would want. Bury. Shovel. I felt rotten like a corpse was within. When I felt his semen in me, I just wanted to wash it out.” (84).

The torture continues night after night. Later, she discloses the same gruesome episode in “An Introduction”:

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 defeated.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me.
I shrank pitifully.(119).

This is apt to say that she writes her autobiography in her poems. Unlike male autobiographer, who is engaged in delivering chronologically those achievements that have made him worthy of mentioning, a female writer is rather engrossed in:

Speaking of adolescence her female body inscribes itself on the text and she remembers her first encounter with male violence that belongs to the same frightening world of trees in the storm and the muttering of the funeral pyre. (13)

She is trying to prepare a text, or on the contrary, she becomes the text, "I've stretched my two –dimensional / Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies, Quarterlies...” (63).

As per Lacan's theories of 'symbolic order,' when a child discovers the language, they find the 'father.'the child understands that submission to the rules of language means equal submission to the Law of Father (Klages). And in this stage, they can recognize sexual differences. This happens as patriarchs run this system. Lacan's theory is about the concept of the phallus, which signifies the dominating patriarchal nature of language. We have never thought that language can be gender oriented, too. But modern theorists are there to prove that society's male hegemonic nature has strategically manipulated language as their own. And this has become the controlling principle of the whole structure. As it is the center and every meaning is defined by it, it is evident that everything related to women should also be determined concerning the phallus. Undeniably, the father and his penis possess the dominating central role in the system of language affecting each system and discourses, " The phallus is the kingpin in the bowling alley of signification: knock it over, and all the other signs come tumbling down. It takes the place of god as the guarantee of meaning” (Ellman19). So, this is another way of subordinating, exploiting, and abusing women by male dominated society. So, in the presence of the 'father,' there is the 'lack' in the mother, which needs to be filled and completed. This patriarchal discourse relegates women to be weak and

incomplete, "Man is always the positive terminal (the norm) and 'women' the 'other'" (Morris 1993). So, if this is the reality and language is the basis of all other systems that control society, women need to change this pattern of language:

For women, the symbolic means awareness of the self as a subject constituted through alien- because logo centric and phallogocentric – discourse, this depends on pre-ordered naming and categorization. Entry into this state thus destines a woman to a position in which she is linguistically marginalized, rendered inactive, or mute in speech and social signification. The only way to overcome this verbal suppression is to speak through a language not dominated by the phallus.

(Foster66-67)

Thus, to establish their position as a woman in particular and human beings in general, women have to lay down an alternative language, a language of their own. This is the source behind the formation of "feminine writing":

Language, many claims, plays a crucial role in defining and maintaining a 'man's world' while delineating and enclosing 'women's place. In trying to move beyond that confining place, many women are attending to and changing

the verbal realities of their daily lives. (McConnell-Ginet, Burker, & Furman xi)

Among several feminists who deal with this issue of giving forth "women's language," Helen Cixous, a French feminist, in her seminal work "Laugh of Medusa," argues that this is a woman's body that has been used since time immemorial used, abused, imprisoned, insulted, mistreated, tortured and finally suppressed in history. Women's 'body' becomes the ultimate site for all types of gender-based violence. So it is by writing their body's women should win back their bodies. She talks about "écriture feminine" or "feminine writing," where nothing would remain hidden from patriarchal scrutiny. Even a woman's sexuality and other intimate details should be the topics of writing their hand. And in this way, the prejudices regarding the female body will be wiped out. At the same time, women's report raises consciousness, which in the long run helps women understand their subordination and consequently leads to a unified sisterhood. Common language forms shared experiences; ultimately, they can make themselves heard as women. Helen Cixous, in this regard, pertinently points out the importance of feminine texts. She asserts that a feminine text is:

... Volcanic; as it is written, it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments... If she's a her- she, it's to smash everything, shatter the framework of institutions, blow up the law,

and break up the 'truth' with laughter. For once she blazes her tail in the symbolic, she cannot fail to make of it the chaosmos of the 'personal'.... (1976:316)

This long but contextual discussion regarding 'feminine writing' is very much appropriate to understand Kamala Das's poetic venture. So when she vehemently declares, "I must let my mind striptease/ I must extrude/ Autobiography" (28: 94-96), she justifies the reason behind such 'strip teasing' of the female body in her poems. And such poems can indeed be considered an instrument to counter gender-based violence in a patriarchal society. In the context of Indian Writing in English, she is undeniably the pioneer in establishing 'feminine writing,' which will challenge the age-old prejudiced institutions of patriarchy. I can conclude my presentation with her lines about initiating a new journey, about a new way of seeing life, "Wipe out the paints, unmould the clay/Let nothing remained of that yesterday..." (My Story 83).

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