

An Assertion of Feminine Rights in a Patriarchal World in Kamala Das's *An Introduction*

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ABSTRACT

An Introduction expresses the poet's innermost thoughts and feelings. The self remains the subject. Her Dravidian identity is emphasized. It also expresses her outrage against the antics who ask her to write in her mother tongue alone. English too has become a part of her intellectual and emotional frameworks. The weight of the female breast and womb crushes her decides to strike back. Kamala Das tries to express everywoman in her search for love. The assertion of the self has after side. She is the sinner and the saint, the beloved and the betrayed she makes love which is accompanied with shame.

Keywords: male-dominated, society, feminine, identity, freedom, love and confessional

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das was born in Malabar in 1934. Both her mother and grandfather were poets who wrote in Malayalam, She started writing poetry while in school, but before contributing to poetry in English, she had won fame as a Malayalam writer. Her poetry appeared in 1965, and *The Descendants* in 1967. She won the PEN's Asian Poetry Proc. Her first volume, *Summer in Calcutta and Other Poems*, published in 1973, brought her wide popularity and recognition Collected Poems Volume I was published in 1954. She writes in the confessional mode, which is often like walking on the razor's edge. The poet in this case may be lured towards callow hysterics or incomprehensive mysticism Kamala Das is free from both. Her poetry has often been considered as a sexual identity or striptease in words, an over-exposure of the physical element or snippets of trivia But the truth is that her poetry is autobiographical, an articulate voice of her ethnic identity and culture. In her, the poet is the poetry, fully obliterating Eliot's distinction between the man suffering and the mind creating. A poet's raw material," she says, 'is not stone or clay, it is her personality. It enacts her quest, an exploration into herself and seeking of her identity. This is one of Kamala's known lyrics and it is also included in *The Summer in Calcutta*. It voices the poet's quest for indentify and fulfillment. It begins colloquially with the poet introducing herself as an innocent Indian girl.

It is a confessional poem in the poetess boldly reveals her private life without any fear or reservations also deals with the plight of women in general while dramatizing her personal rings in the male-dominated society. The poem explores the separate identity and affirmation of the goodness of life's passionate energies. The bridal image conveys the idea of purity of the life-force. It voices her unrealized longings speech which is the production of a healthy and sensitive mind. Kamala Das lost all her female identity and freedom as she advanced in age. Her It was totally governed by her self-styled elderly categorizers. She was forced to flow a strict code of dress and behaviour against her wishes.

"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" (Kamala Das 2002)

But soon there are tensions and conflicts. The lyric is concerned basically with the question of human identity, but is effectively uses the confessional and the theatrical modes in order to focus on questions relating to a woman's or an Indian poet's identity in English. Fit in, they said, 'Belong cried the categorizes. That she responds to this by transforming her alienation from critics, friends, visiting cousins who say. "Don't write in English" into a larger and more universal alienation (sexual, social and artistic) that seems to characterize some of the best literature of our age and is perhaps at the heart of every attempt at self-exploration and self-integration. She begins the poem with the assertion of ignorance in the domain of politics though she can repeat the names of those in power, starting from Nehru. Kamala Das's Indianness is all-pervasive in her poetry. She realistically dramatizes and interprets life from an Indian perspective. In "An Introduction", her

Indian identity is clearly established. There is a direct reference to her place of birth, Malabar, where she was born and brought up. She feels extremely proud of being an Indian having well-defined Indian features. She is equally proud of her Dravidian Brahminhood and pure blood.

Kamala Das presents a new aesthetic in poetic terms. But the full import of the line: "I speak three languages; write in Two, dream in one" is not quite clear to us. True, she is bilingual, wrote novels in Malayalam and poetry in English. What, then, is the language of dream is not known. Be it her mother-tongue or my other language she is equally at home in English, her chosen medium of poetic communication. In other words, she recognizes immense possibilities English to bear the various shades and nuances of feelings, in storehouse of emotional monologues and other equivalents. It is as she useful and natural to her as cawing is to crows or roaring to the lions. She transmutes her joys, longings and hopes into the sensitive and plastic mould of English, "the speech of the mind. These lines reveal that to her what says is more important media which she says it. As she puts it herself: "The language employs is not important. What is important is the thought contained by the words" She confirms the views that the choice of medium is only of marginal significance, since a genuine poet does choose to write language which she is not fully conversant with. Kohli observe "An Introduction is vitally communicative in as much as it is an indication of Mrs. Das use of language which is not her mother- tongue" (Kohli 1996)

"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 queer-nesses
All mine, mine alone" (Kamala Das 2002)

Kamala Das has no interest in politics but she knows the names of the powerful politicians who matter in the Indian political scenario. She has no difficulty in repeating the names of the politicians from Nehru onwards. She is also proud of her typical Indian identity. "An Introduction is very bold poem in which Das expresses her femininity, individuality, and true feelings about men"(Poemotopia.com.) First there is the freedom in choose her own language, and confidence in her creative talent.

Kamala Das is often criticized for using English as the medium of poetic oppression, because it is not her mother tongue. She asks her detractors to leave her alone, because she has never sought their advice. She is free to speak in any language she likes. Moreover, she is totally identified with the chosen medium of poetic expression and is accountable for its distortions and queerness. It may lack of purity of the English language but is, undoubtedly, honest and human. It is half English, half Indian but never lacks the desired emotional intensity. It is most stable for expressing her longings, hopes and is extremely useful to her as cawing crows or roaring to lions. It is human speech, the speech of an enlightened mind unlike the blind or dead language, it is thrillingly alive.

Being a feminist, Kamala Das believes in the equality of sexes. She considers the females as respectable and dignified as the males. She refutes the charge that she cannot do justice to the English language because it is not her mother tongue. She does not consider herself in any way inferior to her male counter-part in creativity. "This autobiographical poem is written in the colloquial style. She presents her feelings and thoughts in a bold manner. She realizes her identity and understands that it is the need of every woman to raise a voice in this male-dominated society. The poet longs for love that is the result of her loneliness and frustration"(.Wikipedia).

The poem may not be poetic manifesto, but it certainly tells us much about her views regarding the medium of poetic expression. The medium does not matter much; it is the thought-content which is of the utmost importance. Writes Anisur Rehman in this connection: "An Introduction offers neither an excuse for writing nor a poetic manifesto: it is vitally related to her urges and aspirations and registers the graph of her growth and consciousness, love and despair, and all that she can do with the English language" (Rehman 1981)

"It is half English, half Indian, and funny perhaps, but it is honest
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it" (Kamala Das 2002)

Then, it come the puzzling adolescence and the pain of growing up. This is followed by a desire to be even with the male world on its own terms, despite the family and social pressures to conform to the traditional feminine role. And finally, comes the realization that her experiences are the experiences of every woman

“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 women-body felt so beaten.
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me” (Kamala Das 2002)

My sad woman-body crushed me: shows the agony of a woman craving for the joy of the soul rather than the m of the body. Kamala Das is a consistent critic of lust which begins and ends with the exploitation of the body only. There is no space for the satisfaction of the emotions cum-spiritual needs of the woman in sexual-relationship For Kamala Das, a women is not an object of male sexual gratification only. Hence, the sexual haste initial shown by her husband is life-long rude shock. He never bothers understand het to win her tower, to establish an emotional rapport with her. He is always in a hurry to satisfy his sexual hunger. This unwanted sex-encounter has created for her a crisis of identity as a woman:

”I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness” (Kamala Das 2002)

A woman has no dignified place or relevance in a male-dominated society. She is denied any distinct identity and is forced to lead a life as dictated and planned by the conventional society. She has no choice of her own and is at the will and the mercy of the all-powerful males who claim to be her exclusive so-called custodians She has to play multiple conventional roles as determined by her self-styled categorizers to curtail her freedom:

“Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in Oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. Don't sit
On walls 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. Don't play pretending games.
Don't play at schizophrenia or be a
Nympho. Don't cry embarrassingly loud when
Jilted in love....” (Kamala Das 2002)

The female persona (Kamala Das) loved a youth of sixteen as she grew up a little. Her lover did not beat her, but leave her crushed and broken. She hated him and finally began moving about in society in a male dress, ignoring her womanliness

Kamala Das categorizers advised her to wear sarees as a girl or a wife. She has to act the roles of an embroiderer, cook or a quarreller with servants. She may have any name or identity but she must fit in, belong to the role as assigned by them. She has to choose a name, a role and avoid playing pretending games. She must follow blindly the order of the elders without any resentment or protest. She is warned not play a schizophrenia or a nympho to avoid playing any particular role. Further, she must not cry embarrassingly loud when ditched or betrayed in love.

Kamala Das lost all her female identity and freedom as she advanced in age. Her life was totally governed by her self-styled elderly categorizers. She was forced to flow a strict code of dress and behaviour against her wishes:

“I met a man, loved him.
Call Him not by any name, he is every man
Who wants a woman, just as I am every
Woman who seeks love.” (Kamala Das 2002)

Kamala Das has an abiding faith in the equality of sexes. She persistently urges women not to be passive but to discover and assert their individual freedom and feminine identity in the hostile male-dominated society. For the poetess, nothing is dearer than the preservation of her freedom. She never accepts passivity and inferiority and rebels against the out dated Puritan code of morality and social taboos.

“ 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.” (Kamala Das 2002)

It is a remarkable confessional poem in which the poetess directly and unhesitatingly reveals her life. The entire action of the poem revolves around the private life of the poetess herself. She describes herself in a series of identities progressing from the physical and emotional to the spiritual level. The "I" used the poem has a direct bearing on the life of Kamala Das. The pathos of her ruined marital life is clearly in the following lines:

“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. I have no joys that are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.” (Kamala Das 2002)

The line shows that Kamala Das is the leading voice of the victimized women in the world. She fearlessly highlights their joys and sorrows which are in no way different from her. She uses "I" not only in a personal but also in a generic or impersonal sense in this poem. The poetess reaches out to other female counterparts through her. She clarifies her stance in the following lines:

There is passivity as well as rebellion against a man-dominated world. The hungry haste of rivers... the ocean's tireless waiting evocative, tender and suggestive images, objectively correlates to psychic states. The poem shows the complexity and completeness of experience combining the saint and the sinner, the beloved and the betrayed. The poet's individuality is revealed here. The poem displays a strong feeling for rhythm. In the end, nymphomaniac persona breaks down, and is admitted for what it is, a defense mechanism for survival, and a cover for her sense of inadequacy.

CONCLUSION

An Introduction is a remarkable confessional poem in which the poetess boldly reveals her private life without any fear or reservations. She has to play multiple conventional roles as determined by her self-styled categorizers to her freedom. Kamala Das is the leading voice of the victimized women in the world who highlights their joys and sorrows which is in no way different from her. She does not approve of the passive role that a woman is compelled to perform in this traditional society. The poem is known for the simplicity of language, form and statement.

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