

'Impersonal Personalism': Kamala Das as a Confessional Poetess

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Abstract

Kamala Das is a poetess who throws light on the oppression faced by the women folk from the patriarchal dominance through her own experience. The societal expectations or the social barriers were never a hindrance to her confessional attitude. The objective of the paper is to find how Kamala Das has used poetry as a vehicle to express her problems, mental dilemmas, and trauma. The paper explains how the poetess longed for love and affection and how she was deprived of the same.

Keywords: Confessionalism, Patriarchal Dominance, Taboos, Introspection.

Confessional poetry or “confessionalism” is a style of poetry that emerged in the United States during the 1950s. It has been described as a poetry of the personal or “I,” focusing on the extreme moments of the individual experience, the psyche, and the personal trauma. The subject matter of confessional poetry includes previously and occasionally still social taboos such as mental illness, sexuality, suicide, etc. The school of “Confessional poetry” was associated with several poets who redefined American poetry, including Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Allen Ginsberg, and W.D Snodgrass.

Confessional poetry is primarily written in the subjective form. It is preoccupied with the personal lives and experiences of the poets. It explores the inner feelings of the poet, and thus, confessional poetry is the poetry of introspection, self-analysis, self-expression, and self-revelation.

Kamala Das, the “singer of feminine sensibility in English Indian poetry,” is a revolutionary poet who started writing poems with complete frankness and focused on the subjects that were considered taboo, especially for women writers. She has often criticized the conservative, prejudiced society that was harsh on her unconventional lifestyle. Kamala’s poems are always confessional and autobiographical. She writes about her miseries and tragedies and her pathetic condition in this male-oriented world. She tries to bring out how she tried to maintain her individuality and feminine identity. She says how this rebellion against the chauvinist society gave her troubles, frustrations, and mental traumas. She says

I must let my mind strip tease.

I must exclude autobiography. (“Composition”)

Kamala Das sees herself as the victim of the prevalent orthodox attitude towards Indian women and male domination. Her personal experience from her husband has made her rebel against male dominance through her poetry. She expresses the vehemence of her emotions and resentments. She found that poetry is the best means to express the resentments against her husband and her grievances against all men because of her bitter experiences through sexual relationships with them. Her poetry gives an identity of a typical Indian woman, the neglected class of Indian society. She says:

You let me use my youth like coins.
 Into various hands, you let me mate with shadows,
 You late, I sing in empty shrines, you late your
 wife.

Seek ecstasy in others' arms.

("A man is a season")

Love and sex are the main themes in Kamala Das' poetry. Her poetic world is full of lust and bodily pleasures. Her imaginative words bring the readers into a world that is emotionally sterile and unproductive. Her poems show that she is every woman who seeks love. Lustful love is identified through these lines:

Love became a swivel-door

When one went out, another came in.

("The Descendents")

Her poems also deal with unfulfilled love and yearning for love, where "The Dance of the Eunuchs" Can be taken as the best example. The dance of the sterile shows the dance of the unfulfilled and unquenchable love of the woman in the poet. Thus the poem reflects the fractured personality of the poet.

Beneath the fiery Gulmohar, with

Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they
 danced and

They dance, oh they danced, till they bled...

There were green

Tattoos on their cheeks, jasmines in their hair,
 some

Were dark, and some were almost fair. Their
 voices

Were harsh, their songs melancholy; they sang of
 Lovers dying and of children left unborn...

Some beat their drums; others beat their sorry
 breasts

And wailed, and writhed in vacant ecstasy.

They were thin in limbs and dry; like half-burnt
 logs from

Funeral pyres, a drought, and rottenness

Were in each of them. (The Dance of the Eunuchs)

The feeling of dejection that Kamala experienced from her husband is explicitly shown in her poem "Glass." She hasn't found any emotional identity or satisfaction with her man, and she is driven into other men's arms:

I enter others

Lives, and

Make of every trap of lust.

A temporary home. ("Glass")

Married at the early age of sixteen, Kamala Das could not find the fulfillment of love in married life, a bond that she could not untie. Love proved to be a pretension. She was tied to the tedium and monotony of sexuality:

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

The bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me.

But my said woman-body felt so beaten.

The weight of breasts and womb crushed me

("An Introduction")

Kamala's forcibly detached emotion from her husband is the only reason for her to find other relationships. And her confessional attitude has brought her universal significance. She was deprived of getting love and affection, and she expresses her vie in a melancholic condition. We find her depressed psychology in her poem "The Old Play House":

There is

No more singing, no more a dace, my mind is an old
 Playhouse with all its lights put out.

("The old Play House")

The poetess is quite alive to her femininity, asserts it, and celebrates it through all her poems. She is a singer of feminine sensibility and rebels against the conventions and restraints of society, which are meant to exploit womankind in a human-made world. Man enjoys a woman sexually. He soon forgets her and never returns. She suffers all through her life because emotional integration has been denied to her. Consequently, her radiant beauty, which once "gleamed like burnished brass," grows old and decrepit.

In "The Freaks," the nymphomaniac persona breaks down and admits that her lust is a defense mechanism for survival, a cover for her sense of inadequacy. "In Love" shows the hollowness of sexual love and the instant pleasure of bodily love.

Conclusion

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 central theme of her poetry. As a confessional poet, she depicts phenomenal frankness, exploitation, oppression, and humiliation that she endured in the male-dominated society. Sexual humiliation and exploitation are some of the main subjects of her writings. Her poems beautifully describe how she fails to incorporate the inner and the 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. The poetess vehemently protests against the domination of the male and the consequent dwarfing of women. It is symbolic of the protest of the entire womanhood against the male ego. Her poems are characterized by an unconventional and extremely modern point of view.

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