

Kamala Das: A Radical Voice in Indian English Confessional Poetry

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Abstract

*A seminal figure in the domain of Indian English poetry, Kamala Das is recognized as one of the prominent authors emerging from the third phase of Indian English Literature. Noted for her contentious yet widely acclaimed contributions, she is particularly distinguished for her confessional approach to writing. The exploration of identity has consistently been a predominant focus within her literary oeuvre. In her personal existence, her sense of identity remained perpetually unsettled. Her profound longing for self-identity and her aspirations for love constitute the central motifs present in the majority of her literary works. This longing and these aspirations serve as emblematic not only of her individual experiences but also resonate with the broader spectrum of Indian womanhood. In her writings, she embodies the roles of the female, the wife, the mother, as well as that of a partner. The principles of feminism are intricately woven into her poetry, and in her quest for self-identity, she also galvanized other women to seek their own identities. The ensuing paper aims to examine and scrutinize Kamala Das's selected poems from the collection, *Summer in Calcutta*, through a feminist lens while also interpreting the identity fluctuations that she encountered.*

Keywords: Identity, Womanhood, Feminism, Confessional

Introduction

Kamala Surayya, recognized as Kamala Das, was a distinguished radical Indian English poet. Born in the traditional Nair family of Kerala on March 31, 1943, she is acclaimed for her confessional style of poetry, which predominantly reflects autobiographical themes. Her candid writing style was perceived as contentious by various critics; nevertheless, she persistently articulated her sexual desires while simultaneously encouraging other women to embrace similar expressions. Through her literary contributions, she actively contested the prevailing societal and patriarchal norms that were entrenched in her milieu (Akhter). The society was, and continues to be, in certain respects, a domain predominantly governed by men; within this male-centric environment, Kamala Das summoned the fortitude to confront and challenge the myriad notions imposed upon women by men. Das spoke unabashedly about love and sexual desires, fostering an environment where other women felt empowered to do the same. In her personal narrative, Das experienced profound disillusionment regarding love, having been married at the tender age of fourteen by her parents. This circumstance precipitated a significant loss of identity, and throughout her life, she sought the realization of her emotional aspirations. The aspiration to reclaim her identity was palpably reflected in her works, as she endeavored to achieve this goal. Her literary works served as a conduit for self-expression, not only for herself but also for other women, as many women refrain from vocalizing their feelings, resulting in their suppression and an erosion of their identity (Akhter).

Kamala Das emerged as a prominent contemporary Indian author, demonstrating significant proficiency in both her poetic craft and her literary acumen. Her oeuvre distinctly illustrates her extensive engagement with Victorian literary paradigms, embracing themes of emotion, sexuality, and sensuality as fundamental components of existence. These essential facets of human life were articulated with remarkable candor in her writings, particularly through her confessional stylistic approach. Confessional poetry represents a specialized genre that addresses themes often deemed taboo within literary discourse, openly confronting subjects that have traditionally remained obscured. The genesis of confessional poetry is primarily linked to the United States, having surfaced during the postmodern period, notably in the 1950s and 1960s. In response to the traumatic events that marked the twentieth century, confessional poetry emerged as a means of evading the grim realities of existence, encompassing phenomena such as the World Wars and their catastrophic aftermaths, including the Holocaust, nuclear peril, and the Cold War. First articulated by M. L. Rosenthal in 1959, confessional poetry is recognized as a potent literary form defined by its intensely personal nature, openness, and emphasis on the stark truths of human experience (Dembo and Phillips). Its exponents are regarded as pivotal poetic voices of contemporary literature. Confessional poets began to diverge from conventional poetic themes, delving into subjects such as psychological complexity, personal trauma, mental health, and sexuality, many of which continue to be perceived as socially unacceptable. This genre does not prioritize religious or moral considerations as its thematic focus. Notable figures such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and W.D. Snodgrass are acknowledged as foundational contributors to the evolution of confessional poetry (Poets.org).

Kamala Das, emulating a distinctive stylistic approach, concentrated predominantly on the intricacies of her own psyche as well as the psychological experiences of women throughout India, rather than situating her poetic expressions within the realms of nature or engaging with themes such as religion or morality. Das was composing during the post-independence epoch of Indian

English poetry. This period witnessed a notable emergence of the poetic voices of women. In addition to Kamala Das, another significant poet who garnered recognition during this era was Gauri Deshpande, a Marathi poet, novelist, and short-story writer who also produced works in English. The poetic oeuvre of Deshpande resonates with that of Kamala Das, as she too resisted patriarchal authority within society and delved into themes such as sensuality, alienation, and the dynamics of man-woman relationships; however, a distinguishing factor between her poetry and that of Das lies in Deshpande's perception of love as a source of bliss, whereas Das grappled with the anguish of unrequited love, perceiving it as a misfortune rather than a blessing. They asserted their presence alongside their male counterparts and carved out a niche for themselves within a predominantly male literary landscape.

Many women poets in India with their writing oeuvre challenge the pseudonym assigned to the women by the society that claims women to be somebody's 'angel' like daughter or ideal wife, or virtuous mother or good grandmother and urge it be replaced with their own individual identity (Padhi 198).

Among the numerous female poets who gained recognition during the post-independence era of Indian English poetry, Das undoubtedly emerged as the most audacious, impactful, and contentious poetess.

Discussion

The contemporary corpus of Indo-Anglian poetry encompasses a significant array of female poets. The quality of their poetic contributions rivaled that of their male peers. Indo-Anglian women authors directed their literary efforts not solely towards addressing women's issues, also towards a profound exploration of identity, one that was both central and distinctively their own. They endeavored to challenge societal, cultural, and various other customary norms. The modern era witnessed an emergence of women in Indian English poetry as they embarked on a journey towards self-identification. This evolution has profoundly transformed, and continues to transform, the circumstances of women in India.

The earliest manifestation of Indian English literature is widely acknowledged to be Indian English poetry. Indian English poetry underwent three distinct developmental phases: imitative, assimilative, and experimental. The initial phase, spanning from the 1850s to the 1900s, as its designation suggests, was characterized by an imitation of English poetic forms by nascent Indian poets. They aspired to replicate the stylistic elements of British Romantic poets and Victorian writers, thereby inaugurating a new epoch in Indian English poetry, laying the groundwork for its future. Notable figures from the first phase include Toru Dutt, Michael Madhusudhan Dutt, R.C. Dutt, and B.M. Malahari (Bhatnagar). The subsequent phase of Indian English poetry marked a departure from the emulation of British poetic traditions. Poets of this period gravitated towards a burgeoning national consciousness, coinciding with the zenith of the struggle for independence from British colonial rule. This phase was particularly salient during and subsequent to India's independence, extending into the 1960s. The essence of Indianness was markedly evident in the poetry of this phase, as poets ventured into more profound realms encompassing spiritualism, cultural heritage, and identity. Kamala Das is emblematic of the third phase, often referred to as the experimental phase. The poets of this era were engaged in a quest for both national and personal identity, as well as originality. Kamala Das employed irony within her poetic oeuvre to articulate her perspective. She portrayed the alienation and longing experienced by women through her literary expressions. She adhered to the principles of liberty, which were intrinsic to feminist thought, as a means to advocate for women's emancipation from patriarchal constraints. Kamala Das emerged as a formidable presence in the domain of Indian English poetry, with few contemporaries able to rival her literary prowess. She was writing during a period when women authors were gaining prominence within the literary sphere. Their literary contributions largely focused on examining and highlighting women's rights, while striving to transcend hierarchical structures and forge new identities. Kamala Das is recognized as a trailblazer in the realm of Indian English poetry. A considerable portion of her poetry is derived from her personal experiences, as well

as the broader societal challenges faced by women during her writing career. In her autobiography, *My Story*, Kamala Das writes in her preface,

Some people told me that writing an autobiography like this, with absolute honesty, keeping nothing to oneself, is like doing a striptease. True, maybe. I will, firstly, strip myself of clothes and ornaments. Then I intend to peel off this light brown skin and shatter my bones. At last, I hope you will be able to see my homeless, orphan, intensely beautiful soul, deep within the bone, deep down under, beneath even the marrow, in a fourth dimension. (Das My Story)

Kamala Das was exceptionally expressive through her poetry, conveying her personal struggles with love and existential solitude. Her literary endeavors represented an attempt to redefine her individuality. Das was an ardent advocate for the feminist movement centered on women's empowerment, and through her literary works, she sought to cultivate awareness among women, enabling them to recognize their individual identities. Primarily concentrating on women's experiences, Kamala Das portrays the female roles of wife, mother, and partner within her poetry. Through her works, she endeavors to illustrate feminine sensibility and identity, as well as the ways in which these attributes are often undermined by their male counterparts. Themes of love and desire pervade much of Das's poetic corpus. In addition to these themes, Das endeavors to reflect upon culture and tradition, eschewing a narrow focus solely on the depiction of womanhood.

Summer in Calcutta represents the inaugural anthology of poetry published by Kamala Das, marking the commencement of her prolific literary career, subsequently followed by the release of two additional collections entitled *The Descendants* and *The Old Playhouse*. This paper endeavors to concentrate on the anthology *Summer in Calcutta* with the objective of examining the overarching theme of identity, both in its entirety and within the distinct works encompassed in this collection. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, a distinguished writer and critic, offers the following commentary regarding Das's poetry:

A good-looking, defensive or disobedient wrap to put out of sight the nudity of the identity, other than more often than not a locomotive of catharsis, a way of tormented self-knowledge. (Srinivasa Iyengar 10)

Through the poetic compositions of Kamala Das, one can readily discern the complexities surrounding the theme of identity crisis; in numerous poems, Das articulates the unresolved tensions inherent in her personal existence along with her profound desire for the resolution of these conflicts. In her anthology, *Summer in Calcutta*, she encapsulates the anguish associated with a void that permeates her consciousness. She expresses a profound yearning for autonomy and demonstrates a robust determination to attain liberation from her emotional afflictions through her literary expressions. Her candid writing style, coupled with her exploration of subjects such as sexuality and desire, renders her oeuvre 'disturbing' to conventional readers. Kamala Das adeptly integrates rationality with her inventive writing style to convey the underlying messages she aims to express in her works. Although she faced ostracism from numerous quarters, literary critics have derived considerable satisfaction from engaging with and interpreting her writings from their unique perspectives. One such literary critic, Devinder Kohli, articulates

Kamala Das is fundamentally a poet of the contemporary Indian female's ambivalence, charitable appearance to it additional blatantly as well as a thing-in-itself than any other Indian female poet. (Kohli 27)

As a literary figure, Kamala Das articulates her sentiments of affection and confession within her poetic compositions. She has authentically experienced these sentiments, and her verse is profoundly intertwined with her autobiographical narrative. The pursuit of self-identity emerges as a recurrent motif throughout her oeuvre. She articulates her deepest aspirations and even the most nuanced secrets of her existence through her poetic expressions. Her verses predominantly explore themes of love, treachery, and sorrow. Das vividly illustrates the portrayals of tormented young women within her literary creations. She interlaces her fervent passions and aspirations with her personal encounters of solitude and her yearning for emotional connection. These lived experiences compel her to interrogate her own identity and the essence of her desires. From an early age, Kamala Das encountered feelings of alienation and endured the anguish of isolation. For example, she experienced the loss of

her grandmother during her formative years, and given the affectionate relationship they shared, this loss constituted a profound emotional upheaval for her. Moreover, she entered into matrimony at the tender age of fifteen with a partner nearly twice her age, thereby experiencing a reality characterized by physical desire devoid of emotional affection, which exacerbated her sense of isolation. This tumultuous journey through love and loss profoundly shaped her poetic voice, leading her to explore themes of longing, identity, and the quest for self-acceptance in a world that often seemed indifferent to her struggles. Even within the confines of her marital existence, Kamala Das encountered profound disillusionment, as she was relegated to the realm of mere physical desire, devoid of any genuine emotional connection with her husband, to whom her parents had arranged her marriage. She was deprived of the agency to choose an ideal partner for herself. This absence of authentic affection propelled her into an exploration for the satiation of her unreciprocated love. In her poem, *The Dance of the Eunuchs*, Das articulates her internal turmoil and employs the 'dance' as an emblematic representation of her innermost self.

*Long braids flying, dark eyes flashing, they danced and
They dance, oh, they danced till they bled... (7)*

She illustrates the fruitlessness of love that she endured, as she yearned for love that encompassed both physical and metaphysical dimensions. Furthermore, she conveys her sorrow and solitude in the poem *The Sunshine Cat*. Das writes

*Her husband shut her
In, every morning, locked her in a room of books
With a streak of sunshine lying near the door like
A yellow cat to keep her company, but soon
Winter came, and one day while locking her in, he
Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a
Line.* (Das *The Sunshine Cat* 49)

Das discovered comfort in the recollections of her formative years, particularly those that evoked memories of her grandmother's residence. The somberness of her marital existence was alleviated by the comforting remembrances associated with 'Nalapat', her grandmother's abode. In the poem *My Grandmother's House*, she writes

*There is a house now far away where once
I received love..... that woman died
The house withdrew into silence, Snakes moved*

*Among books I was then too young
To read, and, my blood turned cold like the Moon
How often I think going
There... (Das My Grandmother's House 15)*

The abode of her grandmother serves as an emblem of affection and safety, elements that were conspicuously absent from her conjugal existence. In her marital union, Kamala Das experienced an overwhelming prevalence of lust rather than the sanctity of marriage, which consequently rendered her both isolated and exasperated. Her feminine essence sustained significant injury as she yearned for affection, yet her spouse proved incapable of fulfilling this fundamental need, thus contributing to her profound sorrow. The profound sense of void experienced by Das as a result of her lack of affection is skillfully illustrated in her poem, *The Freaks*. Das articulates

*The heart,
An empty cistern, waiting
Through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence... (Das The Freaks 10)*

This shows the anguish that was filled inside the heart and mind of Kamala Das due to unrequited love and loneliness. Hers was a constant fight to find, maintain and assert her identity. In her poem, *An Introduction*, Kamala Das writes –

*I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar
I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one.
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 queerness,
All mine, mine alone (Das An Introduction 1)*

Kamala Das embodied a fierce spirit of defiance, as demonstrated by her rich life experiences and impactful literary works. Her relentless quest for self-identity, her candid style of poetry, and her vivid portrayal of feminine individuality powerfully highlights her determination to carve out a unique identity and to gain the freedom essential for choosing her preferred life trajectory in every aspect. As a passionate champion of feminism, she aimed to motivate other women to recognize and nurture their own unique identities. Through her compelling

poetry, she boldly confronted societal conventions and expectations, urging women to celebrate their individuality and assert their voices in a world that frequently attempted to suppress them. Her influence not only resonated with her peers but also paved the way for future generations of female writers and activists, cultivating a legacy that continues to uplift women in their pursuit of self-expression and equality.

Conclusion

The literary contributions of Kamala Das illustrate her candidness and progressive perspective. She articulates the tribulations faced by women and critiques societal attitudes concerning these issues, including the insensitivity and neglect demonstrated by men towards women through her oeuvre. Her confessional writing style bears an autobiographical nature, is deeply personal, and encompasses significant subjectivity. She emphasizes the suffering inherent in a woman's existence, her emotional turmoil, and the harsh realities of her life, highlighting how societal norms impose restrictive expectations on women to conform to traditional roles. Society aimed to confine women within the domestic sphere of being wives and mothers. This confinement within a designated female space severely limited their opportunities for personal development and the establishment of their individual identities.

The transformative oeuvre of Kamala Das facilitated the emergence of a novel domain for women, as her literary contributions were aimed at fostering a heightened consciousness among women, enabling them to formulate an autonomous identity. Through her writings, Das endeavored to articulate a critique of the patriarchal framework by expressing her apprehensions and illuminating its insidious aspects. Her literary endeavors served as a conduit for the voiceless women, thereby rendering her works a locus of empowerment for femininity. However, upon closer examination, the underlying turmoil within Kamala Das becomes distinctly evident in her writings. She epitomized a dissenter who aspired to incite a revolution against the patriarchal order but found herself impeded in that quest. Within her literary corpus, one can discern her aspirations and the objectives she yearns to realize;

nevertheless, the absence of a definitive resolution or a coherent strategy for their attainment is palpable. Her portrayal resembles that of an elephant fettered from its inception, oblivious to its inherent strength even after maturing, failing to recognize that it possesses the capability to shatter its constraints and forge its own liberation.

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