



INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY: KAMALA DAS

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Abstract

Self-assertion is Kamala Das' first line of defence. Claims to remember the names of all those in authority, starting with Nehru, despite not being engaged in politics. She seemed to be saying that they are engrained in her without her even realising it. She repeats that these politicians were trapped in a repeated cycle of time, devoid of any personality, by daring us to recite them as readily as days of the week or the names of months. They were not the architects of time; rather, they were shaped by it.

Key Words: Modernist, Poets, Woman, Language etc.

Introduction

Kamala Das brings together here, the Hindu and Buddhist myths of rebirth with the Christian myth of the Annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel, of her womb being the vessel for the Son of God, the human Jesus, made like man in God's own image. Here in her poem the woman poet is to be born in restructured perfection' in some unknown womb, after receiving the greater love' whose embrace is truth'. This is poetry by Das in her later years. The rage, and anguish of her early poetry, is not absent but relinquished in the Anamalai sequence, in poem VI, for instance, she says,

No, not for me the beguiling promise of domestic bliss, the goodnight kiss, the weekly letter that begins with the word dearest, not for me the hollowness of marital vows and the loneliness of a double bed, where someone lies dreaming of another mate a woman perhaps lustier than his own. (110)

In Kamala Das's early poetry personal rage, dissent and anguish had been a dominant note. And in the early days there was critical prejudice against it. R Raphael's 1979 article 'Kamala Das: The Pity of it', in the Sahitya Akademi journal Indian Literature, Vol. 22, No. 3 is a tearing attack on the autobiographical element in her work. The author compares her autobiography My Story, (a book that she later said was only partly factual) 10 to St. Augustine's Confessions



citing the latter as model! Of her poetry he comments, An experience can be an experience only when there is detachment. Kamala Das's failure to make this distinction has proved to be disastrous to her poetic art'. It is precisely the detached voice of Ezekiel and his contemporaries, and their English models modernists such as Eliot and Auden that Kamala Das disrupts in the 1960s. And, as Eunice de Souza's anthology *Nine Indian Women Poets* (1997) establishes, it is this direct personal voice that is heard in the poetry of Indian English women poets writing after Das. In fact one may say that the personal voice pervades women's poetry even today, even in the lines of a poet such as Aditi Machado born in 1988, and in different contexts, in poems such as *Rehab: A Confession*', for instance.

In this century new readings have rediscovered Kamala Das. Das's iconic poem, *An Introduction*' concludes with the line, *I too call myself I*'. P. P. Raveendran in an essay titled *Text as History, History as Text: A Reading of Kamala Das's Anamalai Poems*', notes how the use of *I*' is a strategy of resistance to the dominant discourse. Raveendran cites Susan Willis to show how black women writers use *I*' in order to construct a site of ideological resistance for themselves, which in a sense is a historical project'. The personal voice in Das's poetry, the autobiographical elements when read in the light of postcolonial theorizations on autobiography offer new insights. Surveying postcolonial autobiographies from erstwhile colonies in Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the West Indies, and Australia, Jesús Varela-Zapata observes in *The Quest for Identity as a Pattern of Postcolonial Voices*'

Kamala Das's autobiographical poem *An Introduction*' In *The Old Playhouse* mentions incidents from the speaker's past and oppressive voices from the present. It voices the resistance mounted through action, *I wore a shirt and my / Brother's trousers, cut my hair short*', and the resistance mounted through choice of language:

Why not leave

Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins

Why not let me speak

Any language I like? (26)

But this autobiographical voice is not just a private voice; it addresses identity by addressing the question of nation, and region within nation, of race in terms of skin colour, before it moves to the question of gender. It is the raw energy of Das's poetry and its statements of the personal



that has been critically acclaimed as being enabling for oppressed and marginalised persons. Kamala Das knew what she was doing in terms of a poetic voice, in terms of a language for her poetry. The issue of English and Malayalam expressed in 'An Introduction' as the right 'to speak any language I like' is part of an effort by this bilingual poet to reach an appropriate language. In the reminiscence in Indian

As a woman poet, she feels the critical focus directed on her personal life. Partly due to her dramatic entry into the English writing scene, partly due to her candid and shocking autobiography, and partly due to her own penchant for expressing in poetry what had until then been regarded as private, the poetry of Kamala Das had not been dealt with holistically by critics in the last century. It is only in the last decade that her poetry is being seen as larger than mere autobiography. This at times voyeuristic interest in her work, she writes of in the poem 'Composition' in *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973):

with every interesting man I meet,

be it

a curious editor

or a poet with skin yellowed

like antique paper,

...

I must extrude autobiography. (5)

Kamala Das not only rejects the romantic construction of the female body but also highlights its exploitation. The poem 'Nani', in *The Old Playhouse*, is about a pregnant maid who 'hanged herself in the privy one day' and the grandmother's refusal to acknowledge her existence, is narrated as a childhood memory. The poet compares the adults' acceptance of the incident to persons who do not wait for answers to questions, who are

unscratched by doubts

For their's is the clotted peace embedded

In life, like music in the Koel's egg,



Like lust in the blood, or like the sap in a tree... (40)

The reference to the koel‘ or kokila, an Indian song-bird, that does not build a nest but lays its eggs in the crow’s nest to be hatched by the crow, indicates the impregnation of maids by the master class. There is an implied class angle in the poem. In other poems such as the Fancy Dress Show‘, in An Anthology of Indo English Poetry (1974) edited by Gauri Deshpande, class‘, that is the difference between the rich and the poor, is more overtly stated __

The patriots have survived their

Long fast; the children of the poor

Have not been so lucky , we hear.

A pity. The city morgues are

Full of unclaimed cadavers. (33)

If children make one suffer, so too do mothers. But in Kamala Das, there is no opposition to the mother in the poetry, although she rejects the mother’s generation of literary writing. In Das’s poetry it is the grandmother rather than the mother who is a source of love. In My Grandmother’s House‘, in The Old Playhouse, she writes, __There is a house now far away where once/ I received love... That woman died‘. (32) The figure of the mother, not her own mother but some sort of archetypal mother is portrayed in terms akin to Ezekiel’s The Night of the Scorpion‘ where the mother, stung by a scorpion, awakes to consciousness after a long night only to exclaim, Thank God the scorpion bit me and not my children‘. In similar vein Kamala Das describes the mother in Death of the Goat‘, in Deshpande’s An Anthology of Indo English Poetry (1974):

The only woman of the house was ill

The one who used to run about at home

Like a mad dervish, busy with her chores,

The one whose hollow cheeks and spindly legs

Made the children say, oh mother, you look

So much like a goat!



Kamala Das's poem 'Forest Fire' in *The Old Playhouse* (1973) encompasses a panoramic vision of myriad scenes and persons and concludes with,

*And in me the dying mother with hopeful
Eyes shall gaze around, seeking her child, now grown
And gone away to other towns, other arms. (39)*

In 'The Roosting Time' a later poem in the posthumously published volume *Closure*, when Das old, ill, and fragile was living under the care of her son Jaisurya, the sense of rejection by grown children is expressed in graphic images,

*Where did the days go,
...
The babies
grew into strangers,
strange foes who carried
in their scabbards
sharpened words,
strangers who bore in their hearts
great padlocked doors.
No, I have not entered
their interiors
for fear of falling
into an abyss of scorn'. (5)*

The theme is so recurrent in her later poetry that it seems to replace the theme of man-woman relationships of her earlier poetry. In 'Blue Veins' published in the posthumous volume, *Wages of Love*, she writes

Blue veins disfigure the hands



Of mothers, not lucky enough

To meet their sons for years and years.

...

Mothers on their cracked feet

Clamber up the temple steps.

By mistake they chant the names

Of their offspring, not God's. (152)

Conclusion

Kamala Das's poetry too, is of this time and place, not located in some abstract realm. Sometimes time and place are specified, as in the poem titled Delhi 1984' in Only The Soul Knows How to Sing, about the massacre of the Sikhs following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. (36) The lunacy of political and religious creeds is time and again critiqued in her poetry. The Dalit Panther' in the same collection, shows how the rich / Roost in warm beds', while the flag wavers chant of revolution The reference to specific time and place occurs in the poems of later poets too. In Meena Alexander's poem For My Father, Karachi, 1947' in Stone Roots (1980), history (of the Partition) is personal memory. Her father a meteorologist by profession, had experienced the skies over Karachi perforated by bomber planes; he watched a man stagger in with a burnt child into Lady Dufferin's hospital. Das's poems to her father record a disappointment that has precedence in poets such as Mamta Kalia's 1970 poem Tribute to Papa' and finds resonance later in D'Souza's Go Away, Old Man'. Mamta Kalia and Kamala Das broke the taboo on writing critically about family, about parents, spouse and children. Only the Soul Knows How to Sing by Kamala Das has several poems to her father.

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