

Confessional Elements in the Poetry of Kamala Das

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Abstract. This article focuses on the confessional tone in the poetry of Kamala Das who is a feminist poet. She is one of the most distinctive Indian poets writing in English. Although, her poetic output is very slender and comprises only three volumes of poetry, but some of her poems are remarkable as they have found her an honourable place in Indian writing in English. Kamala Das is perhaps the most interesting and controversial figure in post colonial Indian English poetry. She writes with frankness and openness unusual in Indian context. Her personal experiences and observations are depicted in her poetry but those experiences and observations seem to become universal. Her poetry is confessional and autobiographical. Her voice symbolizes the modern women's voice who want to be free from the male domination. She craves for the liberty from the orthodoxy and clutches of the custodian of religion. Being a confessional poet, Kamala Das takes the reader into the world of her private life and unveils the delicate facts and even the bedroom secrets. Like a true confessional poet Kamala Das places no barriers between his / her self and direct expression of that self and expresses herself without any restriction.

Keywords : Amazing frankness; boldness; self expression; liberty; women and private life.

In the field of English poetry, there is considerable number of Indian works. Some Indo-Anglian poems are the symbols of real greatness. Some Indo-English poets like H. L. V. Derozio, Kashiprasad Ghose, Sarojini Naidu, Toru Dutta, Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Dom Moraes, Shiv K. Kumar, P. Lal and Kamala Das have written the finest poetry in English language.

In 1950s and 1960s, a new kind of poetry appeared in the United States, which was known as 'Confessional Poetry'. This poetry has been described by some critics as the poetry of the 'personal'. It is a private art and such poems are purely autobiographical. These are marked by its exploration of subject matter. The topics like mental illness, sexuality, and suicide are usually the subject matter of confessional poetry.

The term 'Confessional poetry' suggests that the poet has revealed his real experience directly to the people. Many critics believe the label 'Confessional' as neutral for a poetic movement. It suggests that the writer has communicated so directly out of his personal experiences and memory that he does not separate his autobiographical self from his projection in the poem.

Confessional poetry reflects from the need to ‘confess’ and so each poem casts in this mode in some way, as Robert S. Phillips remarks:

...a declaration of dependence,
or of guilt,
or of anguish and sufferings (The Confessional poet 8)

A ‘confessional poet’ applies no brakes between himself and herself. Restriction on subject-matter is not liked by the confessional poets, though they are generally of personal nature. Anything which is very personal can be his or her theme or subject. So, open language is the steering of the confessional poets for expression and to pour emotions. But it does not mean that these poets are wild in their emotional outbursts.

Moreover, it can be said that confessional poetry is a branch of modern poetry. There is no scope for religion or morals in such poetry. However, there is no regret in it. So, these poets do not expect any kind of redemption or retribution. It is just that they bare their soul to get a psychic comfort. It is of some therapeutic value.

Further, ‘Confessional poems’ are purely personal and highly subjective. There is no ‘persona’ in such poems. ‘I’ is only the poet and nobody else in confessional poetry. The themes are purely embarrassing and they focus too exclusively upon the sufferings like anguish, pain and ugliness of life at the cost of its pleasure and beauty.

Following the above attributes about the ‘Confessional’ poet or poetry it would be the most appropriate to characterise Kamala Das of this category. Kamala Das is the most outstanding among the several women poets. She communicates a powerful female sensibility through her works. Kamala Das who is ‘Confessional poet’, writes in the way and pattern of several new American poets like Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. All these poets communicate with considerable frankness and sincerity and they are highly subjective too.

Kamala Das was born into a decent middle-class family. Her father was an editor of a leading newspaper and her mother was a poetess. Kamala Das jumped into the literary world in India and caught the world by storm in the 1960’s. She accomplished reputation for not just her extremely personal poems but her open expression, frankness and straight forward nature. She is the recipient of several prizes and awards: the P. E. N. Asian Poetry Prize, Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for fiction and Asian World Prize for Literature etc. She was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize along with Marguerite Yourcenar, Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer. She was married at a young age of 15; she used to write away in the night after her

family went to sleep. Her poetry was aggressively individualistic. No any Indo-Asian women authors wrote in such bold way about sexuality and longing as Kamala Das, drawing comparisons to the likes of Sylvia Plath, Nissim Ezekiel and Shiv K. Kumar. Her autobiography *My Story* has been translated into fourteen international languages. She is a bilingual poet who writes in English and her native language is Malayalam.

The English poetry of Kamala Das has been published in Europe in French, German, Swedish, and Serb-Croat translations. She wrote mainly on love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. Indian readers responded positively to her guileless and guiltless frankness in regard to sexual matters. By confessing her private feelings of love, lust and sexuality through her poems, she invited the public into the private miseries of her experiences. There is a spirit of rebellion in her works and it is seen as much in her introduction of herself:

I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. (Dwivedi 52)

Her poems are erotic which express the deep rooted need to be loved and to be fulfilled emotionally and sexually. It earned her the sobriquet 'The Queen of Erotica'. Through her poetry, she confessed to just being physically in love with her husband while not being satisfied emotionally or spiritually. Despite such extent of personal expression through her poetry which was published, her husband continued to be always her biggest supporter.

The poetry of Kamala Das, in itself was a reflection of her life, the way she saw and experienced it. She was attracted by love and for her love meant being honest. In her poem, "The Looking Glass", she urges woman to give the man whom she loves, everything that makes her a woman :

Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers. (13)

This honesty in confessing the things which the society considered untouchable, earned her a lot of criticism and appreciation at the same time. She has been labelled a 'Femme Fatale' who consistently delves into love, sex and loneliness.

The society labelled confessional poets as neurotic, because they did neither follow any tradition nor respected any conventions. They wanted to be unique and not a part of the conventional social setup. This conflict with the society leads them

to introspection. In the course of time, there comes a breaking point when they could not compromise with themselves. They lose themselves helplessly in the battle and start searching for the lost self. This conflict has given birth to a number of beautiful poems. The sensitive poet cannot take failure for granted. At this juncture, life becomes unbearable and the call of death becomes irresistible. They are more than convinced that death can offer them more solace than life. There are many attributes of confessional poetry. Nostalgia for childhood is one of them.

Kamala Das was barely six, when she started writing her poetry. There is a very clear portrayal of her childhood days in her autobiography *My Story*. She wrote tragic poems about her dolls which lost their heads and limbs and she remarks:

each poem of mine made me cry. (*My Story* 6)

As far as theme of the confessional poems is concerned, failure is the most powerful theme. Kamala Das's shocking confession about the theme of love has shocked the critics and the laymen. It was more shocking because it comes from a traditional Indian woman. The search for ideal love is continued throughout her poetry. She was sick of love which was just skin-deep. With her strong aversion to lust, she questions her readers:

... what is
 The use, what is the bloody use?
 That was the only kind of love,
 This hacking at each other's part
 Like convicts hacking, breaking clods
 At noon ... (Only the Soul Knows How to Sing 69)

She always sought her idea of love like her grandmother's love, her parental love and also the soft lesbian love which she had experienced at school. She failed miserably in her life but quite gracefully and poetically. This hopeless feminine anger against her husband, lovers and society made her cruel and passionate. Sometimes, she fails to draw a line between love and lust. Often, she gets vexed, and sighs desperately:

O sea, I am fed up
 I want to be simple
 I want to be loved and
 If love is not to be had,
 I want to be dead, just dead...(The Suicide 35)

In some of her poems, Kamala Das writes with her usual frankness and open-mindedness about married life or man-woman relationship. She frequently complains about man's callousness, wantonness and woman's sufferings.

Kamala Das is beyond doubt, the greatest woman poet in contemporary Indo-Anglian literature. As a confessional poet, she displays feminist ethos in her poems. She is a bilingual writer. She writes in Malayalam, her native language, too under the pseudonym Madhavikkutty. She wrote chiefly on love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. The Indian readers responded very positively on sexual matters. She abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic and somewhat sterile aestheticism for an independence of mind and body at a time when Indian women poets were still expected to write about teenage girlie fantasies of eternal, bloodless and unrequited love.

Kamala Das was not very satisfied with her life since her childhood. She was a victim of patriarchal prejudices and discriminations as most women are. The poet's forthright self exposure, her intensity of feeling and the uninhibited manner in which she has treated sex, her ferocity, bitterness and anger have contributed a lot to her image as projected in her poetry. Her poetical collection '*Summer in Calcutta (1965)*, *The Descendents (1967)* and *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973)*' are a faithful poetic drives which influence heavily other Indian women poets. She celebrates her essential femininity. Her love too, appears in several roles. Her poetry is generally sex-dominated and full of confessional elements.

There is certain honesty in the statement. One can easily accept her description of manner in which she writes her poetry. Besides, her work is free from artificial gimmicks. One of her often quoted poems; "An Introduction" takes the reader to the very root of her creative process. The poem also certifies her bold stand as a confessional poet, her knowledge of three languages and her ability to write in two of them English and Malayalam and to dream in one.

The most remarkable aspect of Kamala's writing is the need to flaunt herself. She holds nothing back as it were to erupt in an intimate, confessional frenzy. She has no secrets at all from the reader. In *My Story*, she remarks:

Each time I have wept, the
readers have wept for me.
Each time I
Walked to my lover's houses like a
bride my readers have walked
With me... like the eyes of an
all-seeing God they follow me
Through the years. (183)

Such an intense involvement with the reader shows her honesty. It also reveals the powerful effect of her poetry on the reader. In the poem 'Words' the opening lines support her claim to be honest, her ignorance about the politics, her choice of language and the process through which she comes to an experience:

All round me are words, and
words and words,
They grow on me like leaves, they never
Seem to stop their slow growing
From within... (Summer in Calcutta 11)

Her poems are frankly confessional, terrifyingly authentic and exclusively an articulate voice of the feminine sensibility:

...Dress in sarees, be girl,
Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook
Be a quarreller with servants.... (An Introduction 27)

Kamala Das's poem "Composition" is largely confessional. The poem is the last in *The Descendants*. It is also the longest. The subject -matter is autobiographical. The poem is expository in nature. The first section of the poem is dominated by the sea which variously projects the mood of the poetess. Although, meeting the sea face to face is connected with the tragedy of life :

"The tragedy of life
Is not death but growth (Composition 29)

Kamala Das indulges in a great deal of heartbreak because of her writing. The poetry never reaches a stage of sickness and breakdown but in her morbid moods, she comes close to the more pathological states of confessional poetry when she steers clear of self – pity on the one hand, and the exhibitionism on the other. She is a confessional poetess in this sense that she grows with the growth of experience. She passes from innocence to experience and every new awareness finds natural and authentic experience in her poetry. In her poems, she expresses her experiences of life with utmost sincerity creating a distinct voice in modern poetry. She never hides anything. She always forwards a plain truth. The poem contains all that seemed of significance in the poetess' life. This is the most elementary observation. But the way Kamala Das expresses the inner world of her alleged ecstasy and suffering in all its nakedness is undoubtedly courageous in the Indian context.

Most of her poems explore the gender roles played by an Indian woman like the embarrassment involved, the resistance provoked and the pain caused. One of the prominent features of Kamala Das's poetry is a desperate obsession with love. When she fails to arrive at it, she is left in the claustrophobic world of the wounded self. Therefore, she says :

O sea, I am fed up
 I want to be simple
 I want to be loved and
 If love is not to be had
 I want to be dead...."(The Suicide 35)

Some of the poems like "The Freaks", "The Looking Glass", "The Old Playhouse", and "An Introduction", among others, have the wounded self as the central theme as well as the principle of organization. Erotic indulgence keeps the self within the orbit of a relationship without making it lament over its wounds.

Kamala Das's poetry is marked by a strong note of subjectivism. All her poetry is an expression of her private experiences in matters of love and sex operating from the personal level rather than from the general or universal. She finds no emotional identity or satisfaction from her husband and is thus driven to others. Thus, her pure love degenerates into lust leaving her emotional urges unfulfilled. Frequently, she draws our attention to herself, resorting to 'I', 'my' and 'mine'.

One reason why confessional poetry sounds so appealing and convincing is that, confessional poets confine themselves to their own experiences. They focus on personal failures and mental illnesses, being very frank and honest, close and intimate. Kamala Das's failure in love is thus illustrated:

I who have lost
 My way and beg now at strangers
 doors to Receive love, at least in small change?
 (My Grandmother's House 32)

In "The Freaks", she says:

who can help us who have lived so long
 And have failed in love (11)

In the confessional mode, she talks about the identity of a woman, as a woman in "An Introduction", it begins:

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. (An Introduction 26)

The confessional poets exploit images, symbols and metaphors which are emotionally conceived. They help them to change disordered pains and frustrations into well defined experiences. For example, the ego of the male world which keeps Kamala Das tormenting all the time, has been described as:

I have a man's fist in my head today
Clenching, unclenching... (The Invitation 14)

The treatment of confessional mode in Kamala Das's poetry has received both negative and positive criticism.

In a nutshell, Kamala Das has used the confessional mode in most of her significant poems. They articulate the umpteen pressure and pains that a woman in modern India has to encounter in her journey from restraint to freedom and tradition to modernity. In most love-lust poems of Kamala Das there is an implicit dramatic tone of Browning's monologues. But the confessional poetry is dramatic, not speculative. The passion-packed abrupt beginning of poems such as 'The Old Play House', 'The Stone Age', 'Ferns', 'The Caretaker', 'Gino', 'Ode to Lynx' dramatise the strains of frustration in palpable metaphorical terms. Each poem is a monologue of pain so well designed that the identities of the poetess, her poetic and her poetic persona, get effaced. Confessional poetry dramatises the conflict of the present malady and the inexorable urge to seek joy through the reminiscences of past experiences for which the poems like 'Composition' and 'Grandmother's House' are good examples. Predilection for suicide which is common in Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton is also present in Kamala Das, although not so potent in her. Thus it is evident that Kamala Das is a great Indian poetess writing in English in the confessional mode.

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