



## A study on art and technique in Kamala Das poetry

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### Abstract

Kamala Das has mostly been assessed as a writer in this genre of confessional poetry. Among the modern Indian poets writing in English today, she has been ranked with such poetesses of dissatisfaction and discontent as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, though the comparison is seen by many as undeserving. There are essentially two sides to Kamala Das's poetry. One is that which is extraordinary centered around her own self, probing the malaise and morbidity that seem to clamp on her poetic vision. The current article highlights the art and technique in Kamala Das poetry.

**Keywords:** confessional poetry, identity, self, love, convent, spiritual, conventionalism, feminist, image, psychological outlets, male - oriented society

### Introduction

Confessional poetry is a type of narrative and lyric verse dealing with the facts and intimate mental and physical experiences of the poet's own life against the demand for "impersonality" by T.S. Eliot and the New Critics. In such poetry, the self is a primary concern which is treated with utmost frankness and lack of restraint, written in ordinary speech and using open forms.

In addition, there are no barriers between the reader and the poet, or barriers of subject matters. It is important at this point what Robert Phillips rightly observes: "Confessional art whether poetry or not, is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down concerned and exposed in order to be destroyed.

Interestingly, the most intimate aspect of life, areas of experience, which one would instinctively keep from public sight, are openly expressed, and not presented as a mere history in poetry. However, the first person singular 'I' of confessional poetry is not the factual 'I' of the poet, but a projection of the poet's being into another person. It is because to achieve a degree of objectivity and the self is used as a poetic symbol to establish the identity/self.

Confession is not at all a new genre in literature. As it is the disclosure of some sort, a writer reveals private or clinical matters about herself or himself of art. As a matter of fact, confessional poetry has a very long tradition that begins from the poets like Sappho and Catullus to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Confessions* (1764-70) based on religious confessions in the lineage of St. Augustine's *Confessions* (C. 400 AD) establishing the impression on the history of literature for the psychological outlets of personal feelings.

As a matter of fact, the creative outlets of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das seem very much similar with opinion and subject matters and also at the same time appear dissimilar to cause of affliction in a different social set up. Though they remain separate in different cultural and social background, their

struggle for feminine longings is very much common. So, they strongly display the autobiographical elements in their poetry. For example, Kamala Das remembers her grandmother's house for the deep love and understanding she received there. In "My Grandmother's House", she expresses her deep nostalgia, "There is a house now far away where once / I received love". Similarly, Sylvia Plath shows deep affection for her grandmother in "Point Shirley", "She collusion of mulish elements and / She wore her broom straws to the hub". As Kamala Das exploits the technique of confession in her poetry in order to explore self, confirming the reality of the inner world while interacting with male chauvinism, she feels isolated and sometimes remains doubtful, obsessed and discontented with the corporal encounters.

In the poem, "An Introduction" she expresses her self-assertive statement attacking on conventionalism, advocating the rights of women and introducing herself as an Indian of a very brown complexion, born in Malabar having the ability to speak three languages:

I am Indian, very brown, born in  
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in\  
Two, dream in one (4-6).

### Research Study

Self is the crucial point of her poems. Her quest for freedom of expression and self-identity refers to the "Spiritual Odyssey" (22) as R.S. Pathak suggests. The following lines reflect:

Why not leave  
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,  
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in  
Any language I like? (An Introduction: 7-10).

Though she does not get the love she longs for but instead of it, she faces exploitation and humiliation in sex encounter with her husband:

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 woman badly felt so beaten.  
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I  
Shrank Pitifully (25-31).

The other side is a compelling expression of personal experiences and a forceful subjective voice. However, this voice is so strong that it extends beyond the personal world of anguished feelings and assumes wider significance. In this context, one can find such tastes and expectations in her poetry like, "The Sunshine Cat", "The Old Playhouse", etc. In her poem "An Introduction", Kamala Das revolts against the set of rules meant for women breaking the conventional womanhood, compelling her to become a traditional feminine role "Dress in sarees, be girl, / Be wife... Be Amy, or be Kamala. Or better/ Still, be Madhavikutty"(33-39) On the hand, she searches for her own identity, wishing to be autonomous in decisions. In the following lines, she speaks herself in the strong voices :

I wore a shirt and my Brother's trousers,  
Cut my hair short and ignored / My womanliness  
(31-33).  
I am sinner,  
I am saint, I am the beloved and the Betrayed. I have  
no joys which are not yours, no  
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I (56-  
59).

Apart from this, Kamala Das poetry embodies agonies or women emerging from the state of subjugation and bondage and speaks about the emancipation of women in a male-dominated society, and seeking to establish their identity and/or the self that mark in her poems like "A Relationship", "Summer in Calcutta", "Marine Drive", etc. In the poem "Afterwards", she expresses the secret hope and fear of womanhood:

Son of my womb,  
Ugly in loneliness.  
You walk the world's bleary eye  
Like a grit-your cleverness  
Shall not be your doom As ours was. (1-6)

In this context, C.R. Nambiar shares his observation about the essence of Kamala Das poetry, "She becomes a feminist writer by making her women conscious and providing them wings to rise and flutter... The essence of her poems is struggle about her own self and... is a cry for freedom" (122). Along with this, her poetry shows a landmark in her female journey from victimization to consciousness. Searching for the self / the identity as the crucial point of her poems, Kamala Das says: "One's real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one, who has decided to travel inward, will realize his route has no end" (109).

Her poems such as "The Freaks", "My Grandmother's House", "A Hot Noon in Malabar", "The Old Playhouse", "The

Conflagration", etc. reflect her journey of the self towards the ultimate. She, however, cannot escape from the inner world that makes her the dilemma of personality.

### Discussion

In "The Looking Glass" Kamala Das explores her quest for personal relationship wishing to develop with the lover through sex. Frankly speaking, she searches her self-identity in the male-hegemonic view or the man-dominant society. It is shocked to learn that the primary duty of a woman is to satisfy the male ego by praising his masculinity and at the same time accepting her own feminine weakness to play as a puppet whose only aim is to gratify male lust: "Stand nude before the glass with him/So that he sees himself the stronger one".

Then, Kamala Das asks the woman to surrender her beauty to the superior male, "Gift him all, /Give him what makes you woman, the scent of ... and all your /Endless female hungers". She also shares a pain of humiliation and frustration, "Oh yes, getting /Aman to love in easy, but living / Without him afterwards I have to be faced". So, she feels sad with her dream of searching the self through love in this male supremacy.

In this context, it is fair to say that she is on the path of love, meets the lover and enjoys pleasure through relation with eyes shut to relieve her but as soon as she opens her eyes she finds her lover missing. She, therefore, calls her husband the "ruthless one, clumsy with noise and movement". In the scheme of man, a woman cannot raise herself above the conventional image that deadens her persona reflecting in "The Old Playhouse":

You called me wife,  
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and  
To offer at the right moment the vitamins...  
I ate the magic loaf and Because a dwarf.  
I lost my will and reason (12-16)

The love and affection that Kamala Das received from her father and grandmother remain an ideal that she searches the whole of her life in others while exploring her identity / self, not for body but is shocked and disillusioned.

In the poem "The Looking Glass", Kamala Das says,  
"...  
drew me to him Rudely /  
With a lover's haste, an armful /  
Of splinters, .../  
I went to him for half an hour /  
As pure women, pure misery /  
Fragile glass, breaking / Crumbling...

In connection to the these lines, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, the noted scholar of Indian writing in English, briefly sums up about Kamala Das and her poetry and prose in his book: "Kamala Das finally appears to be a poet of decadence [...] a victim of the inadequacies of her life, failing even to gain control over her art (712)."

### Significance of the study

Despite such an interpretation comes from the eminent

scholar, it is saved to say that her poetry is rather essentially a poetry of protest, of defiance and of emphatic assertion, all other moods ranging from weak feminine sense of helplessness and submission, to a restless search for happiness and shelter are different expressions of this basic Promethean spirit which is desire to break the rusted shackles and have its voice heard. This voice is expressed in the following lines:

As the convict studies  
His prison's geography  
I study the trappings  
Of your body, dear love,  
For I must someday find  
An escape from its snare. ("Prisoner")  
And, then, wailing into light

Kamala Das' search for ideal lover remains incomplete. Finally, she worships her ideal Krishna. In the poem "Radha", she deeply expresses her inner feelings

O Krishna, I am melting  
Melting, melting  
Nothing remains but You...

Along with an idea of melting, from the material to the spiritual is the path that the female persona shows while exploring the Self / Identity through love. Now, she, finally, merges herself into the Supreme-Self of Ghanashyam. In the poem "Ghanashyam", she expresses this act of being oneness with Ghanashyam, the supreme:

Ghanashyam,  
You have like a  
Koel built your nest in the arbour of my heart.  
My life, until now a sleeping jungle is at last astir  
with music (1-3).

### Conclusion

Kamala Das' poetry presents Indian woman in a way that has outraged the usual male sense of decency and decorum. As she inaugurates a new age for women poets, she constitutes a total rejection of the conventional styles of poetic expression of the dominant culture or the male-oriented universe. Her poetry is the acknowledgement and celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman, not celebrating unbridled sensuality, but projecting the stereotype of a wronged woman and at once asserting the need to establish her voice and identity. Finally, she is successful in her venture of searching the ultimate self and the identity through the art of confession. Before concluding my paper, it is pertinent to remember what Kamala Das says in her book called *My Story*: "Poetry is not a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of the personality ... I could not escape from personality..." (109). Only one can say that her inner world has not remained her personal domain, it has acquired profound symbolic significance for all bruised and battered womankind.

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