

Female Space in the Poetry of Kamala Das

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I am different; I am an entity-Kamala Das

The main purpose of this article is to map the female space that Kamala Surayya Das, (a liberal turned conservative) created in her poetry which can be divided into two phases: pre-conversion and post-conversion. Her poetry is in one sense a search for the essential woman. Kamala Das not only tries to find the essential woman in her writings but also tries in terms of Ibsen's Nora Helmer "to educate" women. In this attempt, the reader does not fail to observe a ruthless selfanalysis and a tone of utter sincerity. Kamala Das, who is "aggressively individualistic" abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic, and somewhat sterile, aestheticism for an independence of mind and body in her poetry before conversion to Islam. Undoubtedly, she is beyond doubt the greatest woman poet in contemporary Indo-Anglian literature. A confessional poet, she displays feminist ethos in her poems. Kamala Das, born in Kerala in 1934, is a bilingual writer. She writes in Malayalam, her mother tongue, under the pseudonym Madhavikkutty. She is the recipient of several prizes and awards: the P. E. N. Asian Poetry Prize, Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for fiction, Asian World Prize for literature, Kendra Sahitya Academy Award, etc. She was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize along with Marguerite Yourcenar, Doris Lessing, and Nadine Gordimer. Her poetical collection includes *Summer in*

Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973), Collected Poems I (1984), The Best of Kamala Das (1991), and Only the Soul

Knows How to Sing (1996). Kamala Das's English poetry has been published in Europe in French, German, Swedish, and Serb Croat translations. She "wrote chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish, and Indian readers . . . responded sympathetically to her guileless, guiltless frankness with regard to sexual matters. Ms. Das abandoned the certainties offered by an archaic, and somewhat sterile, aestheticism for independence of mind and body at a time when Indian women poets were still expected to write about teenage girlie fantasies of eternal, bloodless, unrequited love" ("The histrionics of Kamala Das").

While reviewers of Das's early poetry praised its fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice, they lamented that it lacked attention to structure and craftsmanship. Scholars such as Devindra Kohli, Eunice de Souza, and Sunil Kumar find powerful feminist imagery in Das's poetry, focusing on critiques of marriage, motherhood, women's relationship to their bodies and control of their sexuality, and the roles women are offered in traditional Indian society. Much criticism analyzes Das as a "confessional" poet, writing in the tradition of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Denise Levertov. Some scholars, such as Vimala Rao, Iqbal Kaur, and Vrinda Naur, find Das's poetry, autobiography, and essays frustratingly inconsistent, self-indulgent, and equivocal, although they, too, praise her compelling images and original voice. They suggest that Das is both overexposed and overrated.

Other scholars, such as P. P. Raveendran, connect the emphasis on the self in Das's work to larger historical and cultural contexts and complicated, shifting postcolonial identities ("Das, Kamala").

The unhappy and dissatisfied life of Kamala Das even from her childhood, resulted in the feeling of being a victim of patriarchal prejudices and discrimination. After converting to Islam in 1999, she took a new name, Kamala Surayya. It was an action, she said, she had been contemplating for many years. To quote Kamala Das:

Two plain reasons lured me to Islam. One is the Purdah. Second is the security that Islam provides to women. In fact, both these reasons are complementary. Purdah is the most wonderful dress for women in the world. And I have always loved to wear the Purdah. It gives women a sense of security. Only Islam gives protection to women. I have been lonely all through my life. At nights, I used to sleep by embracing a pillow. But I am no longer a loner. Islam is my company. Islam is the only religion in the world that gives love and protection to women. Therefore, I have converted.

("Kamala Das")

Joyce Carol Oates writes “a woman is like a dream. Her life is a dream waiting.” After much waiting, after conversion to Islam, Kamala Das declares, “I don't want freedom. I had enough of it thrust on me. Freedom had become a burden for me. I want guidelines to regulate and discipline my life. I want a master to protect me. I wanted protection and not freedom.” (S. Balakrishnan's interview “Becoming a Muslim”) The purdah (Islamic face veil) that I wear protects me. I like the purdah which Muslim women wear. I like the lifestyle of Muslim women. The purdah is a wonderful dress. No man ever makes a pass at a woman in purdah. It provides her with a sense of security. (Islamic Bulletin-Issue-19). A crusader for the empowerment of woman now turns out to be a seeker of perfection from God. One can notice this clear journey from body to soul when she says,

Perfect her,
if perfecting is your task (Ya Allah-11-12)

She later confessed that it was folly to convert from Hinduism to Islam. The reason might be a reaction of people's inhospitable and wounding response to her conversion. In the opinion of Dr. V. Alexander Raju the conversion was an inevitable metamorphosis. “In the poems of Kamala Das, we find a rare body and its feelings, and she seems incapable of thinking of eternal life as a bodiless existence. This peculiar stance may be the reason why she is drawn to Islamic religion with its different concept of life after life” (Raju 25). The reader encounters in her poetry frustration created by a lack of love. A vacuum in expectations dragged her to a yearning for an eternal life with her body and soul after her life on the earth. Love for the body could be achieved by a life after death and Hinduism could not promise her such a life. Probably this promise paved the way for conversion to Islam. Her conversion irked the Hindu fanatics, and they started threatening her through letters and phone calls. Most dejected she bade goodbye to her ancestral house and native place and sought refuge in his son's house in Mumbai.

Identity crisis and a quest for identity are basic to the human world. Identity has many aspects and dimensions. When the self is hampered in its fulfillment in various possible roles, it generates an identity crisis which is a state of emotional and intellectual chaos and confusion. This crisis brings alienation. But a woman's identity is expected to merge with

and grow from her various roles as a wife, beloved, mother, daughter, and so on. The possibility of being “SHE” is denied and invariably thwarted by the do’s and don’ts of society.

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?

...I too call myself I (An Introduction)

Kamala Das strongly complains that nobody is serious about the wishes, aspirations, individuality, and even the frustrations of women. In the pre-conversion era as a revolt against the conventional society’s definition of womanhood, she says,

..... Who can

Help us who have lived so long.

And have failed in love? The heart,

An empty cistern,

Waiting

Through long hours, fills itself.

With coiling snakes of silence (The Freaks)

Kamala Das conceives of the male as a beast wallowing in lust with a monstrous ego under which the woman loses her identity. The strong desire for freedom, including the freedom to rebel, forms the central strain in many of her poems. She enumerates the male felonies in her poems and builds up a structure of protest and rebellion in her poetry. Several poems

of Das convey the tedium and monotony of sex within and outside marriage. Their love is a disgusted lust, a poor substitute for real love. The life of Das's persona may be considered a tale of her experiments with love and the repeated failures of her experiments force her ego to be resentful and defiant. She looks upon each encounter as a substitute for the real experience of true love. (34-35).

Even as a child, Kamala Das experienced the bitterness of sexism. She was a victim of patriarchal prejudice. In her autobiographical book *My Book*, her "father was an autocrat" (91) and her mother "vague and indifferent" (20). Her parents considered her "a burden and responsibility and she was given in marriage to a relative when she was only a school girl (82).

Thus, she was compelled to become a premature wife and mother. She complains about it in her poem "Of Calcutta":

I was sent away, to protect a family's

Honour, to save a few cowards, to defend some

Abstraction, sent to another city to be

A relative's wife. (*Collected Poems I* 56-60)

In the same poem, a woman's miserable condition is presented in the image of a doll:

Yet another

nodding Doll

for his parlour,

a walkie-talkie one to

Warm his bed at night" (*Collected Poems I* 56-60).

Man's indifference to woman's miseries is depicted in "The Stone Age."

You turn me into a bird of stone, a

granite dove, you build round me a

shabby drawing room

and strike my face absentmindedly while you read.

(The Best of Kamala Das 97-98)

In the poem “The Conflagration” rebellion of woman’s spirit against male domination and ego is explicit.

“Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried

Beneath a man? It’s time again to come alive.

A world extends a Pot beyond his six-foot frame. (12)

This protest is reinstated in “The Old Playhouse”:

. . . Cowering

Beneath your monstrous ego, I ate the magic loaf and

Became a dwarf. I lost my will and reason, to all your

Questions I mumbled incoherent replies . . . (*The Old Playhouse* 1)

Resentment and rejection of the traditional image of women dictated by patriarchy is cemented in the poem “An Introduction”.

. . . Then I wore a shirt and a black sarong, cut

my hair short and ignored all of this

womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl or be wife,

they cried. Be embroiderer, cook or a quarreller

with servants. (The Best of Kamala Das 12-13)

Kamala Das is exclusively concerned with the female space in her poetry. "For her ideal love is the fulfillment of the levels of body and mind. It is the experience beyond sex through sex. The tragic failure to get love in terms of sexual-spiritual fulfillment from the husband leads her to search for it elsewhere. Each relationship only intensifies her disappointment faced with the sense of absolute frustration and loneliness" (Iyer 203). Her poems reveal her feelings of anxiety, alienation, meaninglessness, futility, an acute sense of isolation, fragmentation, and loss of identity of women in patriarchal society.

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