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## KAMALA DAS' POETRY: A CONFESSORIAL TONE WITH FEMININE SENSIBILITY

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### ABSTRACT

**K**amala Das has been called a poet in the confessional mode, to give out let to the feelings of guilt, anguish and suffering. Confessional poetry is a struggle to relate the private experience with the outer world as it is. Such a struggle is in evidence in the poems of Kamala Das from a very early stage. She transforms her intense personal experience into a general truth. Her own predicament and her own suffering become symbolic of human predicament and human suffering. Most of her poems deal with the theme of unfulfilled love and yearning for love. The meaninglessness of sex relationship obsesses the poet. Through them she reveals her feminine sensibility in her diverse roles as grand-daughter, daughter, sister, mother, wife and beloved. These poems are self-exposure, however, transcend personal



import and acquire universal significance for they reveal the predicament of the contemporary woman be set by her encounter with the difficulties of love and necessary sex. The poetess, thus, suffers from the complex tension of man-woman relationship in the modern Indian society. The present paper focuses on Kamala Das's poetry is in confessional tone which express the feminine sensibility.

**KEYWORDS:** *confessional, feminine sensibility, self-exposure, society, personal experience.*

### INTRDUCTION:

Kamala Das is a bilingual poet of Indian writing in

English. She is the most prominent of confessional group of Indian poets in England. Critics find their paradise in Kamala Das' poetry, for the simple reason that it could be interpreted in various ways taking into consideration the views of the poet on love and also her attitude towards life, as revealed in her works. Devindra Kohli takes the help of her autobiography 'My Story' to interpret her poetry. Some critics compliment her on daringly portraying her views on love, while others take her to task for doing so. She has often been labeled as a confessional poet and indeed in tone and

structure her poetry may be called 'autobiographical'. Her poems bearing on impersonal themes though truly human, fresh and artistic are not her characteristic poems. They are also very few in number. She has published most of her poems in three collections- **Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967) and The Old Playhouse And Other Poems (1973)**. Her first book of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* was a breath of fresh air in Indian English poetry. She wrote chiefly of love, its betrayal, and the consequent anguish. Her second book of poetry, *The Descendants* was even more explicit, urging women to:

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 ..."- *The Looking Glass*

Kamala Das wrote on a diverse range of topics, often disparate- from the story of a poor old servant, about the sexual disposition of upper middle class women living near a metropolitan city or in the middle of the ghetto. Her literary works are confessional in tone and deal with her interior life and subjective state. Through them she reveals her **feminine sensibility** in her diverse roles as grand-daughter, daughter, sister, mother, wife and beloved. These poems are self-exposure, however, transcend personal import and acquire universal significance for they reveal the predicament of the contemporary woman be set by her encounter with the difficulties of love and necessary sex. The poetess had always aspired for the life of freedom. All her poetry is in the nature of a 'Psychic Striptease'. As Paul Vergheese points out , " Her strength as well as her weakness as a poet consists in the fact that she is the most herself and cannot be referred to literary influences.

### The Confessional Mode-

Kamala Das has been called a poet in the confessional mode. The term "confessional" was applied first in the history of modern poetic criticism by Rosenthal, to the poem of the American poet, Robert Lowell. The Confessional poets have thus come to represent one of the most powerful trends in modern American poetry. The poets who belonged to this category included Theodore, Roethke, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsburg, and Snodgrass.

The confessional poetry takes birth in the most urgent need of the poet to give outlet to his feelings of guilt, anguish and suffering. As it is bound to be subjective, it is also bound to suggest ruthless honesty to experience on the part of poet. The strongly autobiographical nature of this kind of poetry involves the poetess interest in the most personal and private themes including her relationship with others as well as her suffering as a patient of mental-illness. Ruthless honesty to one's own experience results in uninhabited quality of expression in the confessional poetry. The way of expression chosen by the poet is essentially anti-establishment and anti-structural. Writing poetry is thus a cathartic exercise for the poet's diseased mind. It calls for pitiless self-analysis and courage to confess the naked truths about oneself.

**Kamala Das is concerned with herself as a victim.** Sexual humiliation becomes a central experience in her auto-biography 'My story'. 'The old play house' is a variation on the same theme:

*"You dribbled spittle into my mouth,  
You poured/yourself into every nook and cranny,  
You embalmed/ My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices"*

All her quests for love end in disasters of lust. The image of the body as a prison which recurs in her poems may be traced to this deep existential anxiety that pervades all confessional poetry. Confessional poetry is a struggle to relate the private experience with the outer world as it is. Such a struggle is in evidence in the poems of Kamala Das from a very early stage. In "An Introduction" she struggles to keep her identity against "the categorizers" who ask her to "fit in". This hostility is given full treatment in her "The suicide" which, with its title, poetic mood and theme, carries the most vital elements of confessional poetry. Here the conflict is between the world as it is and the personal experience of the poet given in terms of the symbols of the body and the soul.

Confessional poets court death and disintegration, so that a higher level of perception may be possible. They long for death and disintegration as well as for psychic wholeness and insights. This tension between two opposites is reflected in the constantly shifting moods of confessional poetry. The moods of a confessional poet are diverse and constantly shifting. One of the longer poems of Kamala Das "Composition" embraces such diverse moods as passionate attachment, agonizing guilt, nauseating disgust and inhuman bitterness. While celebrating her most sublime experiences she becomes aware of the most mundane as its counterpart: she does not attempt to idealize or glorify any part of the self. The same strategy may be noted in "Blood", where self questioning and self-assertion intermingle to form the dominant confessional tone. Images of deep involvement in the physical act of love are followed by those of physical rotting, disgust, and sickness in poems like "The old play-house", "In Love" and "Gino".

**Confessional Poetry is all autobiographical;** it is rooted in the personal experience of the poetess.

T.S.Eliot stressed the impersonality of poetry, but confessional poetry is intensely personal. However a great confessional poet like Kamala Das achieves impersonality in another way. From the personal and the particular, she rises to the general and the universal. She transforms her intense personal experience into a general truth. Her own predicament and her own suffering become symbolic of human predicament and human suffering. Here in lies Kamala's greatness as an artist. She is both intensely personal and universal.

The poetry of Kamala Das may be called confessional in tone due to certain dominant elements of confessional poetry which are absent in the poetry of the most other Indian poets in English.

Her confessional tone of expression is also evident in the poet's analysis of her treatment of lovers in "Glance". She confesses her insincerity and betrayal of lovers whom she hurts with love and often without making- "every track of lust/A temporary -----." She even doubts whether her poetry has offered her desired outlet. She rather regrets why she should have stretch my two dimensional Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies', quarterly a sad sacrifice. Yet, the irresistible form to come to turn with her own tragedy forces a cry out of her as she says in "Composition."

*I must let my mind striptease  
I must extrude  
auto biography.*

Kamala Das turns to poetry as the medium for expressing her most disturbing private experiences as a woman. She is in the main a poet of love from the woman's point of view, to whom the centre is not the blind worship of the husband but the consummation of love. Her poetry, thus, could be divided into three categories- Positive poems, Negative poems and the poems about her grandmother and ancestral house, leaving aside a few poems on some minor observations. The love poems where she expresses satisfaction, and the love poems where she expresses her resentment satisfaction, and the love poems where she expresses her resentment against unfulfilled love, may be termed as positive and negative poems respectively. She believes love to be essentially a satisfying relationship between two individuals having independent identities. She regards love as valuable sources of enriching personality. For both of them, unfortunately, she finds her marriage as the most frustrating experience in which the man crushes her identity as a free individual and turns her into a means of satisfying of his sexual lust. The poetess, thus, suffers from the complex tension of man-woman relationship in the modern Indian society.

Most of her poems deal with the theme of unfulfilled love and yearning for love. 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' is a good example of a poem dealing with the theme. In the poem, she finds an objective correlative in the dance of the eunuchs to represent the theme of suppressed desire within. It was written against the background of the poet's sudden contact with 'a man who had hurt me when I was fourteen years old', she wanted 'to get him at any cost'. In 'The Freaks', she paints a rather helpless situation when the man is passive and the woman is burning with desire, but she is helpless. It is about 'a grand, flamboyant lust'. Her love poetry is rooted in her own personal experiences. It is an outpouring of her loneliness, disillusionment and sense of frustration. Married at the early age of sixteen and finding herself tied to hollow relationship which she couldn't untie, Kamala Das' story makes a poignant reading.

**Her love-poetry is unconventional and shocking to the orthodox**, for her treatment of sexual love and the human body, is free frank and uninhibited. She was unconventional in life, and is equally unconventional in poetry. She refused to confirm to the traditional role which a woman and a wife is expected to play. In one of her better known lyrics "An Introduction," she tells us, how she was asked 'to belong', to confirm' and how she rebelled and tried to be even with the male-world on its own terms.

**Thus, the conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male-oriented universe emerges as a major theme in her poetry.** The poetess is quite alive to her family asserts it and celebrates it in one poem after another. Her poetry is in the final analysis an acknowledgement and a celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman.

It is true that Kamala Das doesn't respond to any other field of experience except that of love in her

poetry. **Kamala Das was a social rebel**, and like all rebels against the accepted social norms, frustration and disillusionment were her lot in life, and her self-expression in her poetry is therapeutic. There are very few social poems in the "The Old play house and other poems." The exclusively limited content of her poetry doesn't, however, retreat her achievement as a poet. Her poetry mirrors her life in all its nakedness the oft experienced horrors and the rare joys of love. Her love experience is so intense that it doesn't leave any stamina for the poetic conciseness to respond to any other field of experience. The lack of variety of subject in her poetry is compensated by the rare intensity of expression that offers a confessional quality to her poems.

The poet is hungry for a satisfying relationship of love with her husband. But her disappointment in getting such ideal love becomes the most agonizing experience for her as a woman. The tortures of living a mechanical life of a married-woman and treated only as an object of sex makes the poet full of suffering and anguish. His negligence of her feeling leads to the traumatic experience of living without an identity. In a number of her poems, she expresses with rare intensity this sense of frustration and disappears with her married life. Among such poems are- The Prisoner, In Love, I Shall Some Day, The Stone Age, Convicts, and The Freaks. She is ruthlessly honest in confessing her own hypocrisy of playing the role of willing sex partners, when in a reality she hates it.

**The meaninglessness of sex relationship obsesses the poet.** She regards herself as "The prisoner", a noble to an escape the prison the marital relationship and hence undergoing a period compulsory punishment as a married woman. The body participates mechanically, while she ignores "Her poor moody mind (In Love) it is a relationship in which her body is exploited at the coast of the needs of her goals. The poets urge for freedom is a part of definition of ideal-love relationship. She describes in "The old play house" how the "monstrous ego" of the male crashes the woman's "urge to fly" and changes her into the life-less existence of 'a Bird of stone' (The Stone Age) and is imprisoned in the cocoon (morning tea), "Love words" and "The man's Tired Lust." (I Shall Some Day)

The ugly marital lives are intensified by the experience of frustration in extra-marital relationships. Kamala Das' honesty in expressing the transitoriness of such relationship strengthens the confessional tone of her poems. There are a very few poems like "Love" in which the poet expresses a sense of fulfillment as a beloved. In "The Stone Age" there is a bitter recognition that love is "shorter" and demands "prize" in terms of social scandal and isolation. The poem An Introduction celebrates the mood of temporary triumph over 'the defeat of love':

....I met a man, loved him, Call  
Him not by any name, he is every man  
Who wants a woman, just as I am every  
Woman who seeks love

Poetry provides a valid medium for Kamala Das to achieve the dispassionate analysis of self which unable her to arrive at the knowledge of the self. She is frank in expressing the complex tensions caused by her extra marital relationship. As there is a transitory sense of fulfillment in this relation, so also there is the sense of guilty of one's own limitation, the sense of betrayal and yet the compulsions to accept. The sense of guilty accompanies her hunger for fulfillment in love in the poems like "My Grandmother's House" in which she sees herself as "a beggar" begging "At stranger's door" to receive love.

In spite of her experiment with love, the poet is courageous enough to admit her own limitations and the lessons she learned for them. For instance, she tells in "Gino" how she can't accept the proposal of her lover to free herself from the chance of marriage so that they may live together. She says regretfully:

"But one only gets/ The life....."

Storm between the antagonistic tension of dream and reality, life is itself death for her. She accepts her fate of mechanical existence of an ordinary wife at the end of poem, but hopes that her senses of discontent

could continue even in the next birth. There is a similar confession of limitations as a woman bound by the conventions of married life in the poem, "I Shall Some Day". The poem shows powerfully her urge for freedom which results in her limited experimentation with other men, only to realize in the end that she would have to return to the prison of married life.

Kamala Das' uninhibited expression of a woman's experience that is complaint to live as a happy life in spite of lack of love is regarded by some of the critics as exhibitionist act. However, the very intensity of the urge to find an outlet and to analysis the self ruthlessly the conventions that writing poetry is medicine for a suffering mind. Bruce King rightly points out Kamala Das' poems are situated neither in the act of sex nor in the feelings of love; they are instead involved with the self. The mind re-asserts its identity by identifying itself with whole world. Thus her need for love from the particular men is sublimated by her love for every object, and her desire to go through every experience around her. As she reveals in "An Introduction" as "I too called myself I" and in "The forest fire" she says "In me /the sights....."

### CONCLUSION:

Kamala writes about sexual frustration and desire, of the suffocation of an arranged love-less marriage, of numerous affairs, of the futility of lust, of the shame and sorrow of not finding love after repeated attempts, of the loneliness and neurosis that stalks women especially. She expresses her emotions and feelings in a typical manner full of courage, conviction and honesty. She uses English as an average Indian speaks, writes and perhaps understands it. But she never tries to escape from harsh reality. It is the language of her emotions & she speaks to her readers as one human being to another. In this lie her originality & her distinction. There are no abstractions no complexities, and no intricate, tortuous constructions. The sun & heat, house & window, cremation and burning, objects of nature, human anatomy, sleep, sea, the mythic grandmother & Krishna constitute her whole range of imagery. Images drawn from the human body are used most frequently. The male body is an agent of corruption, a destroyer of female chastity & individuality. Thus in "The freaks" the anatomy furnishes her with images of horror & ugliness. It is represented as repulsive & destructive. The mouth is 'a dark cavern', the cheek is 'sun-stained' & the teeth are 'gleaming and uneven'. It is an instrument of destruction, her rejection of the male body is total, and is symbolic of her revolt against the male ego and male dominated world. She is conscious of the beauty & glory of the human anatomy & is attracted by it. It is thus proved that Kamala Das tried her best to uplift the position of woman and thus resist the dominance of man. The influence of patriarchy is found in all religions as well as their scriptures women were given inferior position in families as well as societies. The women, in the roles of wives have to obey their husbands and be subservient to them. Thus this venomous ideology of male dominance is injected into even women's veins through the scriptures and they are destined to be inferior till they die. Man has more muscular power than woman. At the same time woman has many qualities which man does not have. They should live in a harmony as other beings do around us. If man imitates other beings in sexual indulgence—overpowering the female—what differentiates human beings from other beings? Thus feminism seems to be an inevitable ideology and more and more women have to come forward and fight for the women's cause.

Her open and honest treatment of female sexuality, free from any sense of guilt, infused her writing with power, but also marked her as an iconoclast in her generation. Harris concludes his discussion of *The Old Playhouse* with an altogether fresh and illuminating reading of Kamala Das's *An Introduction* in the light of postcolonial concerns of home and the world, and the poet's conversion to Islam in the last years of her life. Talking about Kamala Das today means talking about not merely post-Independence Indian poetry in English, he observes, adding that other, far more complicated issues relating to gender, violence, identity and difference, hybridity, contradictory coherence, and . . . language and the art of writing the self cry for renewed attention, pre-eminently in this collection.

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