

A SEARCH FOR INDIANNESS IN THE STUDY OF KAMALA DAS'S POETRY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

The paper, 'A search for an Indianness in the Study of Kamala Das's Poetry and Autobiography' has considered a post Independence poetess Kamala Das, who was well known for her poetic contribution to Indian literature. Unlike other women poets of Indian origin she has represented the grim realities of the life of an Indian woman in general and Kamala Das, herself, in specific. She is from a well versed literary family of Malabar. Her mother being a well known Malayali poetess, and her maternal uncle Narayan Menon - a well known writer of Kerala, she got a literary atmosphere at home. Here the paper examines her poems as compared to her most talked about autobiography, 'My Story' - which is another work which had cost her many a relationships and things which she held dear, yet she never regretted having written it. Her autobiography is a poignant account of her married life and a joyful childhood in Malabar. But before writing 'My Story' her poetries were the only thing which could give her a breath of solace. Thus, it would be appropriate to call her poetries, a 'Verse Autobiography'. Here the aim of the paper is to search her poetries in her autobiography and her autobiography into her poetries. Here the paper examines her poems and My Story to search her poetries in her autobiography and her autobiography into her poetries. Indian-ness has become a very fertile word which directly or indirectly suggests the many fold diversities of the country, as there are host of varieties in food, language, religion, culture, even in thinking. Thus, when an Indian writer writes, may it be a verse or prose; it inevitably will be a culmination of all these varieties. These varieties make Indian writing in English distinct from the rest of the world literature.

Keywords: Indianness, Post-indianness, Autobiography

India before 1947 was a complete different entity and it has felt and experienced a variety of changes and terminations after Independence - the year when India became free from the tyranny of the colonizers. Though there were various gains that our country had received from the colonizers, namely 'English language', which was the key factor or it would be appropriate to term English language the major factor to project Indian intellect on the world front. It was because of Oriental learning that India was introduced to the foreign language that led some aristocrats and intellectuals to study European literature and culture. It is said that, 'Britishers left India but, the English language stayed back.' Although there were scholars who wrote good prose and poetry during British rule. We have Rabindranath Tagore, Shree Aurobindoo, Toru Dutt, to support the argument. These were the writers who not only wrote their hearts in a foreign language but did the job so excellently that even Britishers had to consider and respect them with their awards.

Post- Independence English literature is mostly marked by the narration of partition, Hindu- Muslim strife and feelings of alienation etc. These themes were typically Indian, writers writing about them were Indian but the medium through which they emptied their feelings was English. Very few writers were there who exploited the foreign language to express his basic Indianness. Others were just using the English language to imitate the English pattern of writing. After India got Independence, there were writers who wrote on the then current theme of partition and alienation, we have Khushwant Singh who wrote 'Train to Pakistan', Amrita Pritam wrote her most talked about novel, 'Pinjar', which later was transformed into a movie. Works having Partition as the central theme are still a rage among the contemporary writers. Partition which inevitably brought ruins not only to India but it also affected Pakistan and Bangladesh. Women writers from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh wrote chiefly on the then current affair of partitions and the agonies it brought with.

Pre- Independence writing in English language was an effort to become an English poet, instead of letting Indianness to take a toll. And one of the major hindrances before Independence to the poets was publication of their work. Writers could get only a few books published during the British rule. Whereas, after independence literary expression freed itself from the Englishness of the language. This change was possible because of the efforts of Raja Rammohan Roy who not only gave endless efforts to bring English to India but worked hard to introduce European Sciences and Literature and to be taught by English instructors. And then printing press brought to the country and printing the literary works became easy for Indian authors. If we examine literature after Independence then it is clearly evident that Indian English poetry is quite different in its theme, language, style and imagery as compared to its western counterpart. Indian writers are the species who are very much influenced by the Indian culture, customs and traditions. Most important aspect of these writers' work was that, they had an Indian audience, who was familiar with the above said traditions, customs and culture.

Knowing Kamala Das

The poet that we are judging here is Kamala Das, the tabooless poetess, not confined to any worldly restrictions. Taking Independence as a background, Das's work personified the spirit of Independence. She was from a traditional South Indian Royal family, where women were born to satisfy the lust of their other halves. Their bodies were massaged, perfumed by their mothers and grandmothers just to entertain their husbands better. There Das emerged as a breath of fresh air. Began writing way back at the tender age of seventeen, and expressed what her heart had to say.

Flunged all the chains of tradition, society and what was called womanly etiquettes to become what she felt she was. She was the one who brought about a change in women writing in English. Even after nearly 65 years of Independence, India has not seen anyone like Das who was fierce, unstoppable, lusty, gay and a lot more. After studying her Autobiography 'My Story', which she wrote on the hospital bed when she was suffering from heart decease, one will say that it's her Autobiography which explains it all. But 'My Story' is not the sole account of her life. She best expressed herself in her poetries which are lucid, simple though prosaic in form but poetic in its feel.

A Study of her Poetries and My Story

Her autobiography My Story begins with her childhood memories of Malabar, her schools, snake shrine, Uncle Narayan Menon, her Grandmother and her ancestral Nalapattu household, the sea and her experiences in different cities where she had to shift due to her father's job transfers. In 'My Grandmother's House' reader finds a nostalgic Ammy who wishes to go back to her home and writes, "How often I think of going

There to peer through blind eyes of windows or
 Just listen to the frozen air,
 Or in wild despair, pick an armful of
 Darkness to bring it here to lie
 Behind my bedroom door like a brooding

Dog..." *'The Old Playhouse and Other Poems' (My Grandmother's House) pg.-32, line-7-12*

She juxtaposes her life with her present. Being nostalgic she thinks of going back but then in a tone of disbelief she finds it difficult to relate her past and present and says,

"You cannot believe, darling,
 Can you, that I lived in such a house and
 Was proud, and loved... I who have lost
 My way and beg now at strangers doors to

Receive love, at least in small change?" *'The Old Playhouse and Other Poems' (My Grandmother's House) pg.-32, line 12-16*

If a western poet would have given this ambience then he/she might write poems on the natural beauty of Malabar or her love for the Grandmother and the old House or else like a metaphysical poet he would have expressed it metaphysically but Das is Indian, who is essentially a woman, an Indian woman who has gone through tremendous torpor of life and she sits to write such a poignant verses, who misses her grandmother, that she writes in the poem 'Composition' after being tired of life, always dramatic life which has made her the poet she was, she says: "The only secret I always

Withheld

Are that I am so alone

And that I miss my Grandmother." *'The Old Playhouse and Other Poems' (Composition)pg-5, line-34-36*

Nostalgia being the base factor of her life and works she expresses again her love for the old house and how she ditched her grandmother when she was a small kid, and kept her waiting all night for her. These incidents are even beautifully written in her autobiography. Das is extremely attached to her grandmother, great grandmother and Ammalu- her great grandmother's sister in childhood days. This love very beautifully surfaces in her poems like, 'Blood', 'My Grandmother's House', 'The Suicide', and 'Composition'. One finds a lack of coherence between the content of poems and chapters written about the same description. In chapter number three of her autobiography titled, 'Each Poem of Mine Made Me Cry', Das calls herself as old as a six year old child, who narrates how she and her brother used to have her Malayalam lessons, her wish to be born as a fair child, there she describes her habit of going to the crematory, tombstones were like yellow teeth in her mind, whose writings had faded away due to rain of half a century, the Bougainvillea, the marigold and the monkeys, at the age of six. While we find the same ideas expressed in her poems titled 'The Wild Bougainvillea'. She writes,

“And on streets near old crematories
Where the dead are so dead
That even their tombstones have lost names in
The rains, and are pale now
And yellowed like grotesque teeth, a harvest of
Old teeth and no mourner”

Further she adds,

“Ever sheds a bouquet for them or a tear
But I did see beside
The older tombs some marigolds bloom and the
Wild read bougainvillea
Climbing their minarets.” *'The Old Playhouse and Other Poems' (The Wild Bougainvilleae) pg.-30, line- 24-34*

Poem runs further in the same tone but when we look at the diction and the thoughts then it seems unlike the writing of a child six year old. One may think that her poems are written at the later stage of her life and her autobiography written as she lived those experiences. Though not possible but the diction, thought and style compel us to go beyond the accepted manner of thinking. Born in 1934, Das officially gave us her first publication at the age of 25, in 1960 which was the time she was dissatisfied with her married life and got all freedom to write actively for the publication purpose from Mr. Das. Thus the post-Independence fervor is evident in almost all her works may it be her autobiography or poems. In her poem titled 'An Introduction' she says,

“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” *‘The Old Playhouse and Other Poems’* pg-26 line 4-7

These lines express her joy and celebration of being an Indian. She is unlike Pre-Independence people who were intoxicated with the Englishness of the colonizers and the language. She writes in the language that suites her, and she thus expresses her mind in the poem *‘An Introduction’*

“The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human.” *‘The Old Playhouse and Other Poems’ (An Introduction) pg-26, line 10-14*

Above sited lines expresses her spirit’s Post-Independence fervor. Where she has flung away everything which is not her own, which does not define her and it also include her language. She even dares to express her sexuality which was considered a taboo for Indian women and most prohibited in the women of royal families. She thus talks about her physical growth in the same poem,

“I was child, and later they
Told me I grew, for I became tall, my limbs
Swelled and one or two places sprouted hair. 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.” *‘The Old Playhouse and Other Poems’ (An Introduction) pg-26, line 23-28*

It is not only the Post- Independence atmosphere to blame for Das’ fierce expressions. When it’s about Das, it was a lot more than a matter of country’s freedom and unhindered expression. She had felt and experienced a gamut of emotions and incidents which has dig out the Kamala Das from the young Ammy. She had fearlessly put forth her mind through her fierce style of writing, which has cost her many things she loved and held closer to her heart. In the Preface of her Autobiography she states: *“This book has cost me many things that I held dear, but, “I don’t for a moment regret having written it. I have written several books in my lifetime, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of ‘My Story’ has given me.”* (Kamala Das Autobiography-My Story- Preface)

The poignant account of her married life which she has described in her autobiography is an undercurrent running into all her verses, typically Indian. As it had been the tradition and considered reverence when a girl married a man her father had chosen for her, irrespective of the age difference. She states in her autobiography that her marriage was a pompous show of wealth and gave nothing satisfactory to Kamala Das. It was more an account of lust and pains. She writes with a hope of leaving things behind and flies away:

“I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me with morning tea
Love words flung from doorways and off course

Your tired lust” *‘The Old Playhouse and Other Poems’ (I shall Someday) pg.-48, line 1-4*

She poured her heart so effectively in the below lines, and speaks her mind regarding the so called, and useless married life,

“What I am able to give
Is only what your wife is qualified
To give...” *‘The Old Playhouse and Other Poems’ (Composition) pg.-6, line-16-18*

Further she adds,

“All skeletons are alike,
Only the souls vary
That hide somewhere between the flesh
And the bone” *‘The Old Playhouse and Other Poems’ (Composition) pg.-6, line-22-25*

But, her husband had a realization of his being of her father’s age and always gave her the freedom she desired, like a breath of fresh air.

“When I got married
My husband said, you may have freedom,
As much as you want” *‘The Old Playhouse and Other Poems’ (Composition) pg.-4, line-26-29*

These lines add a humane touch to Mr. Das’ personality who unlike an Indian husband gave freedom to his wife. When in an interview she was asked, “Was your husband jealous of all the attention you got?” and she answered: “*Not at all. He was much older and he felt that I should move about with people of my age*” (George Iype, Rediff.com, 16th July 2000) This freedom made her a woman longing for love and ‘begging at stranger’s doors, at least in small change’. She began writing for publication purpose only after her futile marriage with Mr. Das. She had her lovers scattered in all the cities she moved, be it Malabar, Calcutta, Delhi or Mumbai. An old Uncle who liked her and tried to get cozy with her and she even got kissed from him. She narrated the happening to Mr. Das who warned her against loving that person and said: “*You are always a child in my eyes Ammy, he said, you may play around with love but be choosy about your playmates. I do not want you ever to get hurt in your life.*” (My Story, pg. 133) Still she fell in love with more than a dozen friends of different age groups. Some of them wanted her for the physical company, some were there to be in her poetic company, and some of them were there to worship her as a goddess. But ultimately she knew she had to return to her children and her husband. It was her life which was not confined to her autobiography. Her readers cannot remain untouched by her sensitive, love lorn, lusty, womanlike character. Though being an Indian she has surpassed the English authors while expressing her inner most self, which makes her a typical Indian spirit who lived and expressed fearlessly. Thus, her Indianness is the major content of her personality. She had defined her character thus:

*“I am Sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed” ‘The Old Playhouse and Other Poems’ (An Introduction) pg.-27, line-
27-29*

To sum up her poetry from her own poem - lines,
“I am today a creature turned inside
Out... Just two eyes showing...oh, never mind, I’ve
Spent long years trying to locate my mind
Beneath skin, beneath flesh and underneath
The bone. I’ve stretched my two dimensional
Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,
Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice.” *‘The Old Playhouse and Other Poems’ (Loud
Posters) pg.-47, line-1-11*

It’s her writing in an Indian English defines her Indianness. Often her vocabulary, choice of verbs, idioms and syntactical constructions are part of what we term Indianization of English. She flung away the barriers of writing in a manner which was not her own. This is the aspect which endears her to all her readers. Eunice de Souza in *‘Nine Indian Women Poets- An Anthology (1997)* opined that, “Women writers owe a special debt to Kamala Das. She mapped out the terrain for Post Colonial women in social and linguistic terms. The topics that she had touched are Indian in its very nature, the power of politics, in relationships the instability of feelings, disappointment and depression caused by the division between body and soul, love and sexuality, and she often writes about death, which connotes so many explanations in Indian culture and religion. Thus, for her readers she’s the very Indian poet who dealt with her own personal Indian issues, but the manner and style of her expression made her unique. Most importantly the readers respect the womanly spirit of her who fought and won against all the odds that came her way.

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