

## **BLEND OF CONFESSION AND PROTEST IN THE POEMS OF KAMALA DAS**

**Dr. Archana Singh**  
Amity School of Liberal Arts  
Amity University Haryana  
Gurgaon, India

Confessional poetry is a style of poetry that emerged in the United States during the 1950s. It has been described as poetry "of the personal," focusing on extreme moments of individual experience. Confessional Poets write about subjects which are considered as taboo for a woman, like speaking about sexual acts, sexual desire, description of private body parts, extramarital associations, lesbian relationship. The school of "Confessional Poetry" was associated with several poets who redefined American poetry in the '50s and '60s, including Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Allen Ginsberg, and W. D. Snodgrass. According to Robert Philip confessional poetry arises from the need to confess, "It is in some way a declaration of dependence" or of guilt or of anguish and suffering. (8) Kamala Das's poetry appeals everyone, like a ripe mango, it needs no training in taste to appreciate. She received no formal education but then also she is a conscientious artist who is mainly guided by her impulse and instinct for precise and harmonious words. She is fully aware of the value of words and their finer shades of meanings. Das's provocative poems are known for their unflinchingly honest explorations of the self and female sexuality, urban life, women's roles in traditional Indian society, issues of postcolonial identity, and the political and personal struggles of marginalized people. She writes in both Malayalam and English and has published eleven books in her mother tongue and three books of poems in English.

Recognized as a confessional poet Kamala Das drives the readers into the world of her personal and private life and with inhibited frankness reveals the delicate facts about her marriage and extra-marital affairs.

It is I who drink lonely

Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns,

It is I who laugh, it is I who make love

And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying

With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,

I am saint. I am beloved and the betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no

Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.

(The Old Playhouse 27)

The above mentioned lines depict the bold confession and the crude patriarchy which tries to suppress the emotions and the identity of a woman. She in her effort to discover, her own self, unknowingly shook the norms of Indian society whose rules are different for man and woman. She was 15 when married to a bank employee. She got married, not exactly understanding what marriage is, and what it demands of her as a woman. How loveless sexual

assaults are committed on a woman in the name of marriage are boldly expressed in her poem “AnIntroduction”:

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. He did not beat me  
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten

(The Old Playhouse 26)

Kamala Das’s poems unflinchingly epitomize the dilemma of the modern Indian women who attempt to free herself sexually, domestically, and economically from the roles sanctioned to her by the man-made world. Manmohan Bhatnagar says that "Kamala's poetry embodies agonies of women emerging from that state of subjugation and bondage, and seeking to establish their identity and the self." (Bhatnagar 7). Her poems when focused upon love encompass a wide range of themes, more realized settings and with tender feelings, bringing to it an intensity of emotion and speech. She is a revolutionary writer. Like an anatomist Kamala Das analyzes her own self, her own female psyche. Her own self emerges so powerfully in her poetry that even the moribund system, lying concealed under the social sanctity, is totally punctured by her virulent assault. Nila Shah and Pramodkumar Nayar says in *The Introduction of Modern Indian Poetry in English: Critical Studies* “Kamala Das, indisputably India’s best women –poet to date, shocked and mesmerised audience with her confessional mode... Writing a poetry that was remarkably sensual... and constantly interrogating the “persistence” of English in her deeper thoughts, Das helped launch a different woman’s voice. (12).

Kamala Das’s poetry delineates the best expression of feminine sensibility, its suppression in a male dominated society that’s why her poetry is judged as confessional and autobiographical to a great extent, but at times she publicised what is personal. Iyengar says that: “Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate that the hurts she has received in an insensitive largely man-made world.” (680).

As a child, she experienced a life of neglect from her parents and even from her school mates. Her mother and father had their own interests to pursue and so had very little time to spare for the children. In her autobiography *My Story* she has mentioned their unsuited alliance, “My mother did not fall in love with my father. They are dissimilar and horribly mismatched” (Kamala 5). Even after marriage there is no solace from this neglected life, she sincerely universalizes that her marriage is not successful. She was trapped in a loveless marriage to an overbearing man. Das explicitly describes the traditional gender roles and hegemony of man over woman

You called me wife,  
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and  
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering  
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and  
Became a dwarf

(The Old Playhouse 1)

Kamala Das's poetry is categorised as confessional because she has revealed her secret thoughts and feelings thus taking the readers into her confidence. Das explicitly describes sexuality between the two partners:

You were pleased  
 With my body's response, its weather, its usual shallow  
 Convulsions. You dribbled spittle into my mouth,  
 You poured Yourself into every nook and cranny,  
 You embalmed My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices

(The Old Playhouse 1)

Her marital experience seems to be so unhappy that like a bitter satirist she advises couples in the poem "Composition":

Husbands and wives, here is my advice to you.  
 Obey each other's crazy commands,  
 ignore is the sane.  
 Turn your home into a merry dog-house,  
 marriage is meant to be all this anyway,  
 being arranged in most humorous heaven

(The old Playhouse 3)

She wrote and published her sensational autobiography 'My Story' in 1976 at the age of 42 during her serious illness of heart disease. She wrote it for two reasons: On her doctor's request to distract her mind from the fear of death and to pay for her hospital bills. All throughout *My Story* there is a rebellion or revolt against all sorts of domination including male domination. It is her rebellious attitude that makes her disclose the atrocities committed by rich zamindars and wealthy Nair men towards poor women. She had to face a lot of animosity from relatives for such honest narration of facts which would otherwise have remained hidden from the knowledge of the world.

The work of Kamala Das has been labelled as confessional, but it may with equal justice be labelled as the work of protest. Her writings can be a protest in the sense that it conveys her strong vehement disapproval of the way in which women in India have been treated for ages and ages. Das's poems protest against the deep rooted malaise prevalent in patriarchal /matriarchal society and against the restraints and restrictions which husband or society in general impose upon women. The poem "Nani" is an evocative and expressive poem of protest which exposes the cruelty of rich zamindars and aristocratic men towards the poor maid servants during the feudal times. These women were misused by them and sometimes even killed afterwards to hush up matters.

Nani the pregnant maid hanged herself  
 In the privy one day. For three long hours  
 Until the police came, she was hanging there

( TheOld Playhouse 40)

Through this poem Kamala delineates that the matriarchal head turned a blind eye to such things to protect the image of the family, which is very well expressed in the poem when kamala enquire about Nani from her grandmother and who shows her ignorance :

Another year or two, and, I asked my grand mother  
 One day, don't you remember Nani, the dark  
 Plump one who bathed me near the well? Grandmother

Shifted the reading glasses on her nose  
 And stared at me. Nani, she asked, who is she?

(The old playhouse 40)

She is not merely a writer of her personal experiences. The plight of her fellow beings does not go unheeded by her. At the time when Kamala Das wrote her poetry, the Indian woman was subservient to her parents or her husband while the questions of having extra-marital relationship did not arise at all. Kamala Das was one of the few to claim such freedom and to attain this freedom to the fullest possible extent. The tinge of protest can be seen when her autobiography *My Story* hit the book stalls in Kerala and in other parts of the country her relatives felt deeply embarrassed and perturbed over her revelations of her “certain well – guarded secrets.” (Diwedi 140). The result was that she was not welcomed by her family and even ignored by her acquaintances. But then also she did not stop writing and confessing. She felt immense pleasure in writing it, as she has expressed in her preface: “I have written several books in my life time, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me.” (Kamala 1).

On the whole Kamala Das is against the exploitation of anything, be it body or mind. She hates the enforcement of society. Though she enjoys being a woman, but when her individuality is attacked; and when she is ordered to follow a fixed pattern of life, she revolts against it. Hence, she sometimes considers female body a burden. The urge for release from this bondage gives her poetry great intensity. This discloses her earnest desire to wear shirt and trousers:

I wore a shirt and my  
 Brother’s trousers, cut my hair short and ignored  
 My womanliness

(The Old playhouse 26).

She confesses that the desire of wearing male clothes stems from the frustration and despair that she has suffered, throughout her life, for being a woman. Thus, through her defiant self-assertions, Kamala Das increases our awareness of how the dead weight of outworn values can block the emotional and intellectual growth of an individual. It is in such a rebellious mood against the conservative society that makes her ask if she is happy as a wife and woman:

Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried,  
 Beneath a man?  
 It is time again to come alive,  
 The world intends a lot beyond his six foot frame

(The Descendants 21)

She through her works tries to evoke the feelings of equality and identity of women. She strongly protests the fixed rules of man-made society and tries to instil courage in women and enlightens them not to surrender her body and soul to anyone who consider them as a toy and disrespect them. Her poems wish to make women aware of their freedom and individuality. She wants to liberate and emancipates them from the bondage of society.

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