

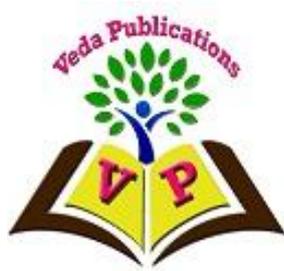


KAMALA DAS'S MATURED POETIC VISION IN THE BACKDROP OF A ROBUST TRADITION: A BRIEF NOTE

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ABSTRACT



Indian English poetry, the offspring of British colonialism is remarkably great in its theme, style and creative potentialities. It expressed Indian themes with remarkable delicacies and the conscious experimentation in the mode of expression, style of presentation and thematic achieving a unique place in the annals of World Literature. This paper attempts to show how modern Indian poetry as a genre in itself, reflecting the life situations and social conditions of Indian people through the literary creations of the so-called prominent Indian writers like A.K. Ramanujam, Gieve Patel, Nissim Ezekiel and R. Parthasarathy who all took to writing poetry maintaining a close link with the cultures of the East and the West, with a particular focus on the poetic output of Kamala Das. It beautifully analyses her poetry as nothing but an endless search for something tangible so as to attain maturity as a writer in the backdrop of a robust tradition haunting her throughout thus evolving an ingenuity of her. It attests to the fact that the poetic output of Kamala Das is meaningful enough to make her one of the leading Indian poets in English along with Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan.

Keywords: *Indian Poetry, Social Conditions, Link With East And West, Robust Tradition, Ingenuity.*

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Modern Indian English poetry is a genre in itself which emerged after the Second World War as a sign of the end of Colonialism. Since it reflects the life situations and social conditions of Indian people, it differs greatly from contemporary British and American literatures. Moreover, the Indian English writers felt a continuing conflict with them and that is the conflict of the traditional culture and the modern consumer society which neatly get reflected in their writings. Their traditional bondage to culture is widely recognized. The so-called prominent writers like A.K. Ramanujan, Gieve Patel, Nissim Ezekiel and R.Parthasarathy coming under this group wrote poetry maintaining a close link with the cultures of India and the west. So it can be said that the most important feature of Indian English poetry is its capacity to sustain its cultural tradition.

Many other Indian English poets of the early period sought inspiration from the British and European models. As a result, there occurred a proper mixing of the world literature with the traditional words in the regional language of India. Indian English poetry during the 1950's showed divergent developments and the major trend was towards the lyrical and the confessional. The poetry of the period exhibited a surprising attitude and a predominance of certain topics such as guilt, sexuality, love affairs, freedom etc., as a kind of experimentation. The traditional beliefs and the national and the societal values are said to have deeply influenced their writings. Poets like Nizzim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, K.N. Daruwalla, Shiv K. Kumar took strenuous steps to establish the genre, Indian English poetry in world literature. Kamala Das's importance is to be assessed in the light of this literary background. Mrs. Das is said to have opened up a new kind of poetry focusing on the reality of personal and the family life and also shared her interest in social reality with poets like Ezekiel, Eunice de Souza and A.K. Ramanujan. While analyzing the elements that constitute Kamala Das's poetry as feminine & Indian sensibility, despair, anguish, romantic love, etc., the critic K.R. Ramchandran Nair remarks as;

"Her concern has been the existential anguish of humanity as revealed mainly

through woman's relationship with man and the man dominated society" (Nair 1).

The ambivalence in her poetry is basically due to her obsession with sex and love. There is always the question of physical love balancing with the spiritual. Commenting on Kamala Das's first published collection of poems, Vrinda Nabar remarks:

"There is indeed a lot of love in the fifty poems of this volume. Also present is a high degree of intensity along with an almost compulsive contour, a disregard for "nice" feminine concealments and an aggressively independent assessment of the man-women relationship" (P 19).

In the words of A.N. Dwivedi, "Kamala Das seems to be acting as the unofficial spokesman of the Indian counterpart of the woman's liberation movement in the West". Her poetry moves through different worlds as seen from different angles like woman, mother, wife, lover, grand daughter etc... Anne Brewster writes:

"Her poetry is derived from the tactile of world of sense experience and is committed to the language of the 'common women', to coin a phrase and the deepest and the most permanent aspirations and doubts of a woman" (P 137).

Mrs. Das's poetry does significantly embody a very personal, idiosyncratic voice and functions the same way as the senses and its medium, the sights and smells are captured. Vincent O'Sullivan holds:

"Das is a woman who stands square onto three of the most interesting features of literature in the last twenty or so years, the dominance of what loosely we call "confessional" poetry, the effect of feminist thought has had on how we now read writing by women, and the increasing attention accorded to new literatures" that hold all terms for writing as it emerges from post-colonial contexts" (P 179).

Kamala appears to be every woman who is unnamed and deserted and who appears to be one among the countless other woman temporarily favoured by God. Generally speaking, themes like romantic love were treated without depth and interest in English poetry. But when love came in the hands of Kamala Das as a



recurrent poetic theme, it got widened in its range, in its complexity and variety, to form something rich and strange. Her themes went beyond stereo typed longings and complaints. As Bruce King has put it, "Even her feelings of loneliness and disappointment are part of a larger-than-life personality, obsessive in its awareness of itself, yet creating a drama of selfhood" (P147).

Kamala Das shows how Indian feminine psyche can develop into a poetic sensibility, not yet reached by her younger contemporaries. Sunanda P. Chavan rightly holds:

"Her poetry voices to the full not only the existential pressures generated during the modern Indian woman's journey from tradition to modernity, but even the Indian woman poets sense of commitment to reality" (P61).

Mrs. Das's poetry is nothing but a passionate expression of the universal experience of love, despair and anguish, for she was obsessed with the tradition of Indian love poetry and she wanted to be free from the contemporary voice of sentimentality which was in tune with Victorian poetry. Even in the confessional mode, Mrs. Das is unique though she share some feature with Robert Lowell and Sylvia plath. Her confessional poetry is the poetry of a Hindu woman and not one nourished and nurtured by a Catholic school. Her poems, no doubt, not only exhibit signs of depression and anguish but also the Indian life without any artificiality other than the artificial Indianness.

Kamala Das' poetry is a cultural avant-garde in Indian English poetry, for she is basically concerned with defining the essential human situation, especially the situation of a Hindu wife and her task is the selection, judgment and presentation of sexual obsession in a tradition-bound Hindu. The contemporary Indian English poetry did not stop with exhibiting remarkable quality, perspectiveness and conviction. Moreover, it exhibited a proper realization of the physical and human landscape of India supported by facts from the local life. Most of the moderns try to construct a framework of ideas in order to modify their sensibility of contemporary life. it is in this context that the craftsmanship of Kamala Das has to be examined. Even though critics identify

specified ideas, the framework of her poetry is the very life blood of her cultural lineage, and themes like love, sex and freedom form part of the very genetic equipment of Kamala Das's poetry.

Kamala Das' progress as a poet can be visualised through several stages. Her treatment of love, the basic human passion, speaks how she struggles hard for it and security in the face of neglect, agony and frustration. Her poetry responds to the urgent need of the human psyche to come to terms with itself which otherwise threatens to collapse under the complex tension generated by the particular experiences. The poetess is seen taking emotional refuge in others and in her past, as she is denied of it by her husband. This leads her to search for an ideal lover and soon afterwards she realizes the futility of such an attempt. She tries to explain the nature of unfulfilment in love from her husband in her statement,

"Sex I can get in abundance from my husband. It was something else that I hungered for" (Kamala Das 61).

Her poetry is an endless search for "the something else". Kamala Das is said to have attained maturity as a writer in the backdrop of a robust tradition. The tradition bound emotional bondage haunts her throughout and thus evolved an ingenuity of her own. The quality that distinguishes her from other women writers is her want of prudence and decorum. As Dr. Radha says;

"Her peculiarity, the quality that distinguishes her from other women, even women writers, is her want of prudence, her lack of decorum and reserve, in writing about matters which are usually considered improper and indelicate for public revelation" (P 30).

The love poems of Kamala Das have attracted a wider relationship for their lyrical directness immediacy and quickness which contain female sensibility in its multiplicity of emotions. One needs insight to understand her poetry, otherwise one will miss much of the charm of her poetry Bijay Kumar Das,

"As she deals with the conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male oriented universe, her tussle with love, lust and womanhood has most usually centered



itself upon her relations with her husband or with the other man in her life" (P 44).

A proper examination of Das' creative mind will be complete only with a casual reference to her use of language. She succeeds greatly to bring her readers close to the experience sensory or intellectual by her use of language. She has a choice for short sentences whenever she wants to convince her readers with sensory impressions:

"This was to be a rape scene... It was silent... His mouth on my skin was hot. I shall forgive you, I whispered, but go away, go away... Then he fell asleep" (Kamala Das 113).

Passages of this kind convey her honesty and sincerity and for this always she uses clear forceful, elaborate, and fairly simple language. The emphasis on firm nouns and verbs add reality to the situation and one can get an attitude in one's judgement by the meaning suggested by the words. Colourful adjectives and words pregnant with emotions mark her individuality:

"I felt revulsion for my womanliness. The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing me. My private part was only a wound; the soul's wound showing through why are you weeping, Amma, asked my little son and I shook my head, saying nothing, nothing" (Das 110).

Her clarity of expression and appropriateness bring the readers close to her experiences. Here one can notice the use of certain 'feeling words' which largely create empathy with the readers. Her images emerge from the cultural sources of the typical Indian background which define her identity. They are pointers to her native sensibility, the Indian fauna and flora. Her images are not worked out, rather they arise out of emotional reaction, organically fused into the very fabric of her poetry.

To conclude, Kamala Das is not of an age but for all ages. She can identify people of all ages, sexes and character as she writes in "The Child in the Factory":

"In the Parlour
The girl-child, now grown clever
Taken off her clothes
And turns shyly around
I am she" (summer in Calcutta 29).

Sunanda P. Chavan is right in saying that the poetry written by her so far is meaningful enough to make her one of the leading Indian poets in English along with Nissim Ezekiel and A.K. Ramanujan.

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