

Colloquial Simplicity and Confessional Tone in Kamala Das Poetry

Dr. M. K. Angadi

Associate Professor of English, Government First grade, College, Kalaghatagi, 581204, Dist. Dharwad
(Karnataka)

Abstract:

Kamala Das poetry is un-conventional and rather shocking in the Indian context. But Mrs. Das is always true to herself both in her prose and her poetry. As a wife she was expected to look to the comforts of her husband, to minister to his needs, in short to play the conventional role of a Hindu wife, and this has dwarfed unstained her own personality. This paper focuses on the confessional, intimate, and conversational style, utilizing straightforward English to express intense, personal emotions and break patriarchal norms. Her diction is characterized by bluntness and raw sincerity, designed to reflect the inner life of a woman.

Keywords: language, confessional, intimate, emotions, disillusionment, Images and English

Introduction:

Indian English poetry originated from the quest of educated Indians to find a suitable medium for expression. Their English education provided them with sufficient knowledge on the world classics. The earlier efforts of imitating English poets produced many talents of immaculate qualities. Those who wrote poems in English were admired by everyone. Soon a number of poets started writing in English. For these poets English was the only language in which they could express their ideas. They used English as if it were their mother tongue. Kamala Das started writing at first in Malayalam. Being a member of a family with much literary heritage her attempts to project her views were encouraged. Her short stories were widely admired as they presented a girl in her teens in the most realistic way and in the true social and emotional perspective

Indian English poets have blazed a new trail and among them Kamala Das has an important place. Mrs. Kamala Das her maiden name was Madhavikutty – was born at Punnayurkulam in Malabar in Kerala in 1934. Both her parents were poets, and so poetry was in her blood so to say. She constantly speaks of her Dravidian blood and of her Nair heritage. She was educated mainly at home. It seems that her grandmother showered a lot of love and affection on the growing child, and she is often remembered in her poetry, as in *A Hot Noon in Malabar* and *My Grandmother's House*. She looks back to her happy days in her company with nostalgia and yearning. Her parents are seldom remembered with such love and affection. Wherever she has gone and wherever she has lived, she has remembered her early girlhood, cherished and nursed by her grandmother.

She was married at the early age of fifteen, now has three children, and is settled in Bombay. Like that of Nissim Ezekiel, her marriage has not been a happy one; in it she has failed to find that fulfillment which a woman craves. The result has been frustration and disillusionment and this bitter personal

experience colours all her poetry. It has been a hollow-relationship. She can neither endure it nor can she untie the marriage-knot. Her husband is not unkind to her, indeed, he has been a good friend to her and has allowed her every freedom, but as she herself tells us, it is love which she craves for, and not freedom. The poignant story of her life, of the psychosis in *The Current Weekly* from January to December, 1974, and it makes poignant reading.

Like most Indian poets writing in English, Kamala Das is also bilingual. She writes both in Malayalam and English. Once when asked why she chose to write in English, she replied that English being the tongue most familiar to her, she used it to express herself. Her choice of English was by no means a deliberate one. One of her better-known poems *An Introduction*, which has often been regarded as her poetic manifesto, throws considerable light on her use of English:

“Why not speak in
Any language I like? 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, don’t
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to cows or roaring to the lions, it
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and
Is aware. Not the deaf, blind speech
Of trees in storm or of monsoon clouds or of rain or the
Incoherent mutterings of the blazing
Funeral pyre” (Kamala Das 33).

In other words, she recognizes the immense possibilities of English to bear the various shades and nuances of feelings, its vast store-house of emotional analogues and other equivalents. It is as useful and natural to her as cawing is to cows or roaring to the lions. Suresh Kohli observes: “..... ‘*An Introduction* is vitally communicative, is and much a comment on the poem as an introduction of Mrs. Das uses of language which is not her mother tongue.” (Kohli, 59)

Kamala Das received no formal education. She has no university degree, still most almost instinctively, she is aware of the value and significance of words, and recognizes fine shades of meaning of one word and another. For her, as for W. B. Yeats, “words alone are certain good.” In the poem entitled *In Words*, the poetess reveals her sense of the value and significance of words, and also that words come to her spontaneously:

“All round me are words, and words and words,
To grow on me like leaves, they never
Seen to stop their slow growing
From within.....But I tell myself, words
Are a nuisance, beware of them, they
Can be so many things, a
Chasm where running feet must pause to
Look, a sea with paralyzing waves,

A blast of burning air or
A knife most willing to cut your best
Friend's throat.....words are a nuisance, but
They grow on me like leaves on a tree,
They never seem to stop their coming,
From a silence, somewhere deep within....." (Kamala Das 36)

She is fully aware of the immense potentialities of words. They grow on her 'like leaves on a tree'. But more than this, words to her are also a "nuisance", "a chasm where running feet must pause", "a blast of burning air" and "a knife most willing to cut your best friend's throat". It appears that the poet does not consciously work upon them to create spectacular effects. They emerge from "somewhere deep within": the inner recesses of the mind. She uses words with caution. Poetry, for her, is an organization of the best words in the best possible order. The harvest of words in the poems is rich and varied; it gives the true picture of the poet's moods and feelings. She achieves an easy commerce between the idea and the word.

Further, light on her artistic methods is thrown by the lyric *Without a Pause* A poet must write as soon as he has something worthwhile to say. There must be no gap between the occurrence of an idea and its expression:

"Write without
A pause, don't search for pretty words
Which dilute the truth, but write in haste, of?
Everything perceived, and known, and loved....."(Kamala Das 38)

With the occurrence of idea, words also occur on the finger tips of a born poet like Kamala Das. Quite unlike Nissim Ezekiel's dictum that "the best poets wait for words", Kamala Das writes without any loss of time.

Commenting on her poetic diction Anisur Rehman says that her words are neither splendid nor glittering, nor conceived on a gigantic scale. She is a poet in the confessional mode, and hence, her diction is colloquial, that of the confidential that of a sensible friend—her vocabulary being drawn largely from the language of everyday use. "Kamala Das's poetic diction has nothing to do with philosophical musings or religious chants. Nor does she wield her instrument to compose songs of love or of nature. It is no Pandora's Box, but a cluster of simple counters emotionally charged and at times, transformed into emotion themselves. She is unlike the modernists whose dislocated syntax startles us as much as their poetic apprehensions puzzle. Kamala Das does not make experiments with words but only imparts a personal touch to them. Diction is not a tool in her hands but a poetic medium pure and simple."(Anisur Rehman, 10)

Kamala Das uses words imaginatively, so that they are adequate to express her emotions. Her words come to her effortlessly, and become one with her emotions. Sometimes, a powerful verbal-drama is enacted through her use of emotionally charged words. Thus in *My Grandmother's House*, the use of the word, 'withdrew, is vivid and active, and as a result the empty, deserted house comes to life and seems to be a partner in the grief of the poetess. Similarly, in the following passage from *A Hot Noon in Malabar*:

"This
Is a noon with mistrust in
Their eyes, dark, silent once, who rarely speak

At all, so that when they speak, their voices
Run wild, like jungle voices” (Kamala Das 38)

The words, “Jungle voice”, adequately convey the poet’s emotions, enact a real drama, and impart to the poem its peculiar tone. Every epithet tells and glows with emotion. In this way the distinction between ‘poetic’ and ‘un-poetic’ is obliterated. As Srinivas Iyengar puts “It is no mean achievement that while giving the impression of writing in haste she reveals a mastery of phrase and control over rhythm the words often pointed, envenomed, and the rhythms nervously, almost feverishly, alive. It is quite remarkable that her words assume various forms with the shift in attitude and are, consequently, tortured, relaxed or plain as the situation demands. Words are neutral, colorless, a “cemetery of dead metaphors until they are used in an emotive way in poetry” (Srinivas Iyengar,611)

The words and metaphors of Kamala Das pulsate with life since they embody feelings and not thoughts. Her language in comparison is that of her fellow-poets is distinct for its emotional overtones and imaginative rendering of the words and metaphors. She uses the words with their accepted meaning and import, and does not search for novelty. She herself says, “It is not essential that a good poet should change and recreate the language. But some words when used by a poet are seen to change and acquire a different meaning. Every good writer is a sculptor with words. An artist has the right to do what he thinks best with his material. This right he acquires gradually with experience.”(Kamala Das’49)

Commenting on Kamala Das’ use of language David McCutcheon writes. “Kamala Das claims that her language is half-English half-Indian, but to me her effortless casual style shows nothing remarkably Indian in structure, rhythm or choice of words. It is possible, however, that future scholars going over this material by computer methods, will discover specifically Indian turns of phrase, rhythms, and sentences structures, and even associate them with predominantly Indian emotions in certain situations. There is no doubt that the poetess has said that her language is half-Indian and half-English, but her primary concern is to find verbal equivalents for her emotional states, and she does neither care to cultivate Indianness nor to modify or alter the meaning of words. Her primary concern is to convey to her readers the intensity of her feelings, her frustrations and her disillusionments, and this concern determines her use of language, as well as her frequent repetitions of words, and her frequent ellipses (use of dots), which have attracted a good deal of criticism.”(K Radha,49)

Anisur Rehman justifies such ellipses and repetitions in the following words, “These are not the mechanical intensifiers; rather they reveal the poet’s tendency to discount the use of many words and rely on just one word for the maximum effect. They also create a sense of drama and the sound pattern that emerges corresponds closely with the phonetics of thought” (Anisur Rehman,18) This habit of doing away with words is also manifested in her use of ellipses. For instances in *The Invitation* we read: “I have a man’s fist in my head today / Clenching, unclenching....” The ellipses indicate the silence after a pause and also pinpoint the poet’s suffering. The repetition of a phrase followed by ellipses occurs in *Substitute*:

“It will be all right, it will be all right
It will be all right between the world and me.
It will be all right, if I don’t remember
The last of the days together.....”(Kamala Das 48)

The ellipses suggest here both the pains and joys of living the last of the days together.

The view of Eunice De Souza in this connection is also worth quoting, “A stylistic device which reinforces the predominantly emotional quality of these poems is Kamala Das frequent repetition of

words, lines and even sections of a poem. One of the few poems in which repetitions works in Kamala Das, poetry is 'Substitute' in which the repetition of the phrase, 'It will be all right, it will be all right', suggests exactly the opposite, in fact: the futility of her attempts to disguise the emptiness of her life. But she often repeats words which don't bear repeating. There is no need to repeat "their naked words which don't bear repeating. There is no need to repeat "their naked fear...('An Apology to Goutama) to forget/To forget oh, to forget' (The Sunshine Cat) or 'cough their lungs out' (The Flag). The lines would be stronger with the repetition cut out."

Kamala Das' diction is marked by simplicity and clarity. It is the language of her emotions, and she speaks to her readers as one human being to another. In this lie her originality and her distinctions. There are no abstractions no complexities, and no intricate, tortuous constructions. Her imagery is always functional, never merely decorative, and is drawn from the familiar and the common place. Often her images are symbolic and thus they increase the expressive range of her language. The sun and heat, house and window, cremation and burning, objects of nature, human anatomy, sleep, sea, the mythic grandmother and 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 and individuality. Thus in 'The Freaks' the male anatomy furnishes her with images of horror and ugliness. It is represented as repulsive and destructive. The mouth is 'a dark cavern', the cheek is, "sun-stained" and 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 the male-dominated world. She is conscious of the beauty and glory of the human anatomy and is attracted by it, but its raging lustfulness disgusts her and hence the uses of images like those cited above. She is also conscious of disease and decay to which the human flesh is heir to, and this awareness also colours her imagery. In the following lines from 'The Looking Glass':

"Notice the perfection
Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
Shower, they shy walk across the bathroom floor,
Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
Urinate. All the found details that make
Him male and your only man. Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you won an, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers" (Kamala Das 53)

The images concretize her fond awareness of the intimate human details. They express adequately her abiding love for the human body as also her aversion to it. Indeed, images are her themes as well as the modes of expression. They dramatise her passion and impart certain depth and resonance to her feelings (Anisur Rehman, 17).

Kamala Das makes frequent use of the Radha-Krishna and Mirabai legends to provide a mythical framework to extra-marital sex in her poetry. Krishna is the mythical love, and Radha and Mirabai are the eternal seekers for their object of love, Krishna. These mythical personages are recurrently used as symbols to sanctify the quest of Kamala's women persona for emotional fulfillment outside marriage. They also bear testimony to her 'Indianness', which is also borne out by her use of the typically Indian flora and fauna, scenes and sights, for her purposes. Her poetry is deeply rooted in the Indian soil and in

Indian cultural tradition, and despite her modernity, and her “revolt” against the role a woman is traditionally expected to play in Indian society.

Conclusion:

Kamala is a great and original poet with a distinctive poetic personality of her own. When at her best, she remains unequalled and matchless. But often she fails in that artistic self-control which characterizes her work at its best. It can also be tedious if it gets out of control, and then no amount of mere honesty will save the poem. Mrs. Poems in each book could have been cut out without any sense of loss because they tend to express emotions, already expressed, in a weaker way, with the result that cumulative impression is not a rather relentless whine. Too often there is scarcely a trace of grit or resilience to shape and control the emotions.

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