



KAMALA DAS AS A “CONFESSIONAL POET”

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ABSTRACT :

Kamala Das is one of the three most significant Indian poets writing in English today, the other two being Nissim Ezekiel and Ramanujan “Summer in Calcutta” (1965) this first published anthology of Kamala’s poetry, sets the tone for her entire output. It contains only fifty poems and with few exceptions the theme of all of them is love, or failure in love. “The Descendants” (1967) is the second poetical volume which has 23 poems in all. Most of these poems are further variations of her favourite theme of sexual love. This collection is by and large, bitterly death-conscious, perhaps death – obsessed. “The Old Play house” and Other Poems” (1973) came out in 1973, and contains 33 poems in all, of which twenty have been taken from the two previous volumes. The poems of this volume reveal the poet’s pre-occupation with death and decay not noticeable in the earlier volumes. The title-piece is the poet’s protest against the domination of the male and the consequent dwarfing of the female.

In the mid-sixties Kamala Das who took the literary world by storm has created a permanent place for herself in contemporary Indo-English poetry, the other two being Nissim Ezekiel and Ramanujan Like Jane Austen in English fiction, her range of themes is limited. It is a kind of psychological striptease that she enacts in her poetry. Her own self is at the very centre of the three anthologies of poetry that she has published up to date, as also that of her prose works. She is primarily a poet of feminine longings. She tried to assert her individuality in a male dominated world. From this revolt arose all troubles, psychological traumas and frustrations. A bird’s eye-view of her poetry would serve to clarify the point.

“Summer in Calcutta” (1965)

It has a fairly good number of poems on love and sex or failure in love. The exceptions are ‘The Flag’ and ‘Sepia’. ‘The Flag’ deals with the





Indian poor while 'Sepia' deals with the Indian who lack in originality and trenchancy of her best work. 'To a Big Brother' and 'Punishment in Kindergarten' are evocations of her own childhood.

In this volume we come across a world, which is, harsh, sun-scorched, tropical, heavy with the smell of rotting garbage and death, where even the men have limbs like 'Carnivorous plants'. The image of the April sun in it brings to the poet a sense of sensuous relaxation of warm intoxication which inspires as well as relaxes so that "my worries doze". What distinguishes Kamala Das reaction is her unconscious intimacy with this torture.

The opening poem "The Dance of the Eunuch" sets the tone of the whole volume, as well as of the other two volumes. In her poem, their whirling movement and extended frenzy are contrasted with 'inner vacuity', and so they are mere convulsions. The poem depicts her 'emotional vacuity' and the dance is also symbolic of her inner self. 'In love', which follows, considers the gap between the sensuous completeness of sexual love and the memory of the experience lingers& somehow come up in the mind.

Her best known poem in this volume "An Introduction" is concerned with the question of human identity and fulfillment. We get a picture of the poet introducing herself as an innocent Indian girl. The lyric focusses on questions relating to a woman's or an Indian poet's identity in English. Her alienation from "Critics, friends, visiting cousins" who says, "Don't write in English", into a larger and more universal alienation (sexual, social and artistic) is perhaps at the heart of every attempt at self-exploration and self-integration. First, there is the freedom to choose her own language, and confidence in her creative talent. Then the pain of growing up and puzzling adolescence is seen. Lastly, then comes the realization that her experiences are the





experiences of every woman. There is passivity as well as rebellion against a man-dominated world.

“The Freaks” a remarkable lyric is appreciated for its abnormal psychological situation in love-making and its unredeemed helplessness and deep despair. “A Relationship” is based on a love-hate relationship. The poet’s deep-seated yearning to be loved is best displayed by the emphatic verb “must” and then dramatized by the triple repetition of the phrase “I love”. “The Testing of the Sirens” communicates simultaneously a strong sense of belonging to one and uniting with another.

“Visitors to the City” is a passionate, etching of a scene composed of ‘sights and sounds’ offered by one morning on Strand Road’. “Punishment in Kindergarten” is warm and muffled and recounts the picnic of the poetess at Victoria Gardens to which she and her classmates were taken and the incident which followed it (as Kamala Das tells us in her autobiography. “The Siesta” is associated with sleep, the sun-lit tank, which brings ‘an anonymous peace’ to her or with dreams which glow pearl-white.’

“With Its Quiet Tongue” expresses the poet’s agonized concern with the wretched coldness of heart. Another poem, “My Morning Tree” deals with the familiar theme of desperate longing for fulfillment. The poem is one of dark despair and the sense of fulfillment which is so strong dominates poems such as “Winter”, “A Phone Call in the Morning”, “Love”, “Spoiling the Name”, “In Love” is here imagined and telescoped but not without involving the cost of an almost brutal irony, for the blossoming may not only come too late but may be the end itself. “The Testing of the Sirens” is a befitting close to the book looking backwards as far as “The Dance of the Eunuchs”.

The Descendants (1967)





This second poetical volume contains only twenty-nine poems and with few exceptions, they are about love. The exceptions are the two poems about her own sons “Jaisurya’ and ‘The White Flowers’’. This collection is by and large, bitterly death-conscious perhaps deathobsessed. The finest lyrics in this collection are ‘The Descendants’; The Invitation; Compositions; Shut out the Moon; Neutral Tones; The Suicide; A Request. The truth is that there lurks beneath the pseudo-metaphysical poise the inability to reckon with emotional defeat and frustration, with a sense of nothingness. The meaningless of Das’s life is sourly conveyed in such poems as “Shut Out That Moon” and “Neutral Tones”. The negation of all positives in life reminds us of Thomas Hardy.

“The Suicide” with the central image of the sea moves on a pattern of dialogues and reflections. The theme is the poet’s contemplated or suggested suicide, but the poet finally rejects it through a renewal of the sense of life. For her, the sea is the source of a constant distraction, a nagging threat, and invites her to negation.

In “Composition” also, the sea image occurs. The consistently fatigued tone and the ironic overtones dominate the poem’s structure. The “Composition”, ironically, is but one’s growth and consciousness that cause the tragic catastrophe. In “The Invitation”, while the sea offers one kind of death, a complete negation, her lover whom she can’t disobey offers another metaphorical death – the feeling of ‘lying on a funeral pyre with a burning head. The poem “Ferns” arrests sexual love in an image of self-devouring and self-mocking intensity which suggests that perhaps there is a sense in which glorification of physical love carries with it an element of disenchantment. Another poem, “Convicts”, depicts physical love in the elemental terms of physical labour and heat, and as a physical experience which belongs to no intellectual language.

“Substitute” is both poignant and truculent. The need to conform to the conventions of a hypocritical society makes one’s feeling of





emptiness all the more painful. The poem is poignant, and is ironical in its meditative refrain. The tone of the poem is Prufrockian.

The poem "Captive" describes Kamala Das's love as 'an empty gift', 'a gilded empty container' and herself as the prisoner of 'the woman's blinded hunger, the muted whisper at the core.'

The Old Playhouse and Other Poems (1973)

This collection of poems came out in 1973 contains 33 poems in all. Of these, 13 are old poems taken from 'Summer in Calcutta' and six from "The Descendants."

The title-piece "The Old Playhouse", is the poet's protest against the domination of the male and the consequent dwarfing of the female. It is addressed to the husband, and is largely personal. As a result of male egotism, she feels emptied of all her natural mirth and clarity of thinking.

A different kind of protest – against the fanaticism of religion is obvious in "The inheritance". This poem is bitter, ironical but not cynical. It deals with the hatred and intolerance that go in the name of religion, whether it is Islam, Christianity or Hinduism.

"The Blood" is another admirable poem in this collection. It evokes the poet's love of her old house and of her grandmother who is now dead. This long poem also shows the poet's pre-occupation with thoughts of death and decay. The serious tone suggests vague premonitions of some impending calamity and the house which is personalised comes to life.

The poem "Naini" is a peculiar blend of irreverence and gravity. The tone is comic and we find the poet laughing in 'the court of death'. The suicide of the pregnant maid servant is spoken of as a 'comic dance', but the flippant tone is merely a mask for the underlying seriousness. "Gino" deals with the terror of sex and its attraction and revulsion, are powerfully expressed. It encloses a tempest of feelings and the poem is a pack of references coming out in succession. The poet is conscious of her own ageing and the decaying of her body.





“The Stone Age”, is another admirable poem that deals with the reality of love being offered to the poet by another man rather than by her husband. This poem portrays the husband of the woman persona as, ‘Old fat spider’ who weaves ‘webs of bewilderment’ around her and erects the dead, dull stony wall of domesticity, comfort, and lassitude and thus turning her into a bird of stone, granite dove.

“After the illness” is concerned with the theme of survival of her as well as of the lovers, love for her. She seeks to provide a mythical framework to her quest of love outside marriage. She seeks an objective co-relative, for her own love-longing and finds them in the age-old Hindu myths of ‘Radha-Krishna’ and ‘Mira Bai’.

“The Millionaires at Marine Drive” is both astringent and meditative in nature, its subject being the incurable loneliness of the woman. The warmth which her grandmother gave her still haunts the poet because no man has been able to give her such a genuine love.

To conclude Kamala Das is a poet in the Confessional mode and hence her diction is colloquial that of the confidential chat 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. She has rightly been called a “Confessional Poet” because, it is such ‘psychological equivalents’ that we always get in the poetry of Kamala Das and in this respect she is to be compared with such confessional poets as Rober Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Roethke, Berryman, Fudith Wright and others. As a poet of love, Kamala Das looks most naive, honest and frank almost in the fashion of Sappho. In points of enjoyment and applause, she stands next to none in the whole length and breadth of Indian poetry in English today. Linda Hess, a ruthless critic of Mrs. Das also concedes that, “a genuine poetic talent is at work here”. We fully agree with the noted Indo-English poet, R. Parthasarathy, when he remarks that “Kamala Das





impresses by being very much herself in her poems” and her tone is distinctively feminine.

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