

**Impact
Factor
2.147**

ISSN 2349-638x

Refereed And Indexed Journal



**AAYUSHI
INTERNATIONAL
INTERDISCIPLINARY
RESEARCH JOURNAL
(AIIRJ)**

Monthly Publish Journal

VOL-III

**ISSUE-
XII**

Dec.

2016

Address

- Vikram Nagar, Boudhi Chouk, Latur.
- Tq. Latur, Dis. Latur 413512
- (+91) 9922455749, (+91) 9158387437

Email

- aiirjpramod@gmail.com

Website

- www.aiirjournal.com

CHIEF EDITOR – PRAMOD PRAKASHRAO TANDALE

“Kamala Das: A Fiery Feminist and Confessional Voice of the Post-independence Era”

Dr. Aradhana Vaidya

Associate Professor,
Bharatiya Mahavidyalaya Amravati

I also know that by confessing
By peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul
and
To the bone's
Supreme indifference. (Composition)

Abstract:

Kamala Das belongs to the post-independence era. Her poems are highly feminist in tone and confessional in nature. She was candid, blatant and outrageously outspoken. There is no aspect of her life which does not form a part of her poetry. Her confessions were a cultural shock for the Indians who never heard a female voice carrying such vigor and nerve. She dared the society which was male-centric. The otherwise canceled facts were out in open for the world to know. The major themes of her poetry was love, relationships and death.

Keywords : Post-independence, feminist, confessional, candid.

Kamala Das is the voice of the mid 60s and 70s. Most of her outstanding work was produced and published during this period. Her contribution to Indian writing in English remains unparalleled. There is no voice so undeterred, candid and unrelentless as that of *Kamala Das* in the world of poetry. She needs to be applauded all the more for fearlessly daring the patriarchal Indian society and creating a niche for her in the male dominated literary field. She has been labeled as a 'feminist poet' and a 'confessional poet'. Though at one time she had stated that she was neither feminist nor confessional, she went on to write volumes of poetry that proved otherwise. Not only her body of poems but her autobiographical work *My Story* is also written in a confessional mode. It is interesting to understand why Kamala Das felt like adopting the confessional mode for her poetry. Confession as we know is accepting of one's sins and wrong-doings in the confession box in the unseen presences of a priest. It is a Christian ritual of seeking forgiveness. In the world of poetry this concept entered when the poets wanted to break-free their feelings and thoughts and bare their heart and souls to their readers. It was a way of purgation, a cleansing of the inner-self. It was a process of unburdening the self of all the experiences one has gained during the process of living. It was also an urgent need on the part of the poets to share their personal and private life with the readers in order to acquaint them with intricate life they have led. It was also a means to justify their life-journey. After the Americans introduced the confessional writing in poetry it was immediately accepted as a popular mode of self-expression all over the world. In Indian writings in English, it was Kamala Das who made it famous with her unabashed writing style. This paper will try understanding Kamala Das as a confessional poet- "I must let my mind striptease/ I must extrude autobiography" (Composition) and also as a feminist poet- "I too call myself I" (An Introduction)

Kamala Das, as they say, was controversies favourite child. In the 60s and 70s, when there wasn't much talk on women liberation, Kamala Das wrote the most candid and controversial poetry. Her poetry invited lot of criticism from the literary field and the society as well. Things that had remained undercover until now was thrown open for one and all. Her confessions, through the poems, created a wave of repulsion and admiration; all at the same time. While some critics strongly condemn her for writing overtly 'anatomy-poetry' others appreciated her for being honest enough to call a spade a spade. In her autobiographical work *My Story*, Kamala Das has viewed her life's journey with the aloofness of an unconcerned observer. She states the facts that has shaped her life and bares the dual standards of the patriarchal society. It not only gives jolt to the age-old believes, but also makes the literary world stand up and take serious notice of the new female-centric voice. Breaking free the stereo-types of the early 50s- 60s, a new face of the Indian women emerges which is demanding as well as assertive. As Devindra Kohli points out, "The important issue is the way in which a woman writer can redefine herself and her world without or, as some of them think it inevitable, by breaking away completely and violently from the traditional roles of women."¹ Devindra Kohli, "Kamala Das," Delhi University The Literary Criterion, p.176. As India was searching for an identity after the British rule was overthrown, so also Indian women were groping in the darkness, struggling to find the 'true self', their identity devoid of all the male tags.

Kamala Das' poems reflect this struggle to cope with the establish system and at the same time to rebel against it. She was advised and forced by the 'categorizers' to 'fit in'. In protest she states,

'...I wore a shirt and my
Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
My womanliness. (An Introduction)

While, as a woman, she wanted an identity 'I too call myself I' she understood the difficulty very soon. Married to a man much older than her, she neither received love nor respect. Carrying out the mundane responsibilities she lost her will to live: "Cowering/ Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and/ Became a dwarf". Her husband, as she portrays him, was an insensitive man who, when she asked for love, only offered his lust.

.....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. (An Introduction)

And as the husband tried to tame the swallow, the swallow longed for the blue sky and the fresh air. This yearning for freedom forms the theme of many of her poems. "An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors/To shatter and the kind night to erase the water". She dwells on the idea of leaving the unsatisfying life with the husband, "I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon/ You built around me with morning tea,/ Love-words flung from the doorways and of course/ Your tired lust." (I Shall Some Day) and yet she knows she has no escape. She will have to return to him, "...But, I shall some day return, losing / Nearly all, hurt by wind, sun and rain, / Too hurt by fierce happiness..." (I Shall Some Day)

Kamala Das talks of submissiveness, oppression and subjugation of women in number of her poems. These poems reflect her initial struggle to adjust with the given circumstances.

She accepts the life chalked out for her by her parents who cared little for the girl who was too brown. As she states, "My life had been planned and its course charted by my parents and relatives. I was to be the victim of a young man's carnal hunger."² She realized that she was a misfit in the society which regarded women as a liability, or as 'the other'. Interestingly, Kamala Das fights this battle in her unique way. First she tries to find escape in death. Ending her life would see the end of all problems. In a world devoid of love, she preferred to die rather than live a loveless life. The bargain was simple-love or death- "O sea, I am fed up/I want to be simple/I want to be loved/And/If love is not to be had,/I want to be dead, just dead" (The Suicide).. However, this mood changes into a more admirable revolt. She realizes that rather than 'begging for love at strangers doors' or 'drink lonely drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of strange towns' she would rather live life on her terms. As Anisur Rahman points out, "The quest for an emotional liaison and her failure to establish one is the central burden of Kamala Das' poetry."³ Unsuccessful attempts of search for love in a loveless marriage prompts Kamala Das to find love outside marriage. There is a whole body of poetry which deals with the extramarital affairs and the guilt regarding this. In the poem, *With Its Quite Tongue*, she states, "What does a woman lose/ Or even gain from a love affair?" Seeking love and failing to get it, she finally comes to the conclusion that, " Like majority of the city-dwelling women, I too tried adultery for a short while, but found it distasteful."⁴ Devindra Kohli explains this – "When Kamala Das speaks for love outside marriage she is not really propagating adultery and infidelity, but merely searching for a relationship which gives both love and security."⁵

Kamala Das's poetry and her personal life, both were controversial. In both the aspects she was labeled 'unwomanly' for her bold stance, her outburst and her confessions. Her personal and private life was bared for the readers. If one is to follow the graph of her poetry in relation to her life, one can easily trace the events running parallel to each other. In the poem Loud Poster's, she states, " I've stretched my two dimensional / Nudity on the sheets of weeklies, monthlies, / Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice." Confessions in her poetry helped her to cope with the eccentricities of life. Her overtly confessional poems and her fiery feministic poems have made her stand apart in the arena of Indian poetry in English. In her later years she converted to Islam. This, as she states, was also a way of self-expression, a way to lead life not on the conventional mode but as she desired.

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