

Confessionalism and Extrasensory Detachment in Kamala Das Poetry



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Indian writing in English, as it concerned technically today, has been a very challenging form of literature, as it is highly complex form of literature. This literature is a curious phenomenon with fairly long history of more than one hundred and seventy years. The poetry of this period vibrates with intense patriotism and political awareness. Kamala das has contributed Indian English fiction by opening a new panorama of human nature, man-women relationship and socio political consciousness. Kamala das performs anatomy on her own self, on 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. The carnal exploits, a women is subjected to so humanly, is fully and exclusively exposed. Das is one of the best known contemporary Indian women writers. Writing in two languages, English and Malayalam, She has authored many autobiographical works and novels, several well received collection of poetry in English, numerous volumes of short stories, and essays on a broad spectrum of subjects.

I also know that by confessing

By peeling off my layers

I reach closer to the soul...

I shall someday see

My world de-flashed, de-veined, de-blooded...

-----Kamala Das

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As the above lines shows, Kamala Das is a Confessional poet, whose poems are compared with Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath etc. According to William Walsh “Her poetry is self centered and unabashedly sexual although the sexuality seems more fascinating to the poet because it is hers than because it is sexual”. She speaks of her sexual experiences in a tone that “you cannot believe darling”, which are both self-indulgent and defiant:

*Ask me, everybody, ask me,
What he sees in me, ask me why he is
Called a lion”*

Since the publication of her first collection of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), Das has been considered an important voice of her generation who exemplifies a break from the past by writing in a distinctly Indian persona rather than adopting the techniques of the English modernist. Her own traumatic experiences in love and sex are candidly confessional and absolutely forthright. But poetry provides her the strongest outlet to give vent to her pent-up feelings for poetry, for her is very personal and private. So far efforts have been made by me to prove that Kamala Das’s poetry is full of the elements of confessionals, and separation from her real happiness. Kamala Das raises her confessional traits to the level of a specific universal appeal. But the question arises- what does she confess? What is the subject of her great confession? What is the authentic touch in her writings? And what is the extrasensory detachment in her poems? Drawing upon religious and domestic imagery to explore a sense of identity, Das tells of intensely personal experiences, including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside of marriage, and her life in matriarchal rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home.

Basically the struggle of oneself ultimately becomes the struggle of the whole humanity and herein lays her forte; for, the best confessional poetry is that which rises above subject matter to achieve some sort of victory over pain and defeat, poems which are glossy on the victory of life. Kamala das achieved poetic sublimity largely because of pure effect and partly due to achieving success in different constituents of sublimity. Basically sublimity means: inspiring deep veneration, awe, or uplifting emotion because of its beauty, nobility, grandeur, or immensity.’ the sublime”, they tell us, “is born in a man, and not to be acquired by instructions: genius is the only master who can teach it. (Longinus: *On the Sublime*). He regards it as a defeat rather than a quality in sublimity. Longinus says that some people deny this outright because they think that sublimity is a gift of nature and is has nothing to do with art. They say, “A lofty tone is innate, and does not come by teaching. Nature is the only art that can compass it”

Basically postcolonial Indian English poetry has been developed by the awe-inspiring talent of Kamala Das has a great personality which is the source of the strength of her poetry credited as a most outspoken and even controversial writer, Kamala Das earned fame as voice the voice of women's sexuality. She denigrated the tradition bound, conservative society which was always harsh on her conventional lifestyle. The reader often feels that he is in the presence of a writer who is highly gifted and skillful largely emotional and subjective and who is ever celebrated the charms of the body and the hunger of the sex without getting him bored even for a while. The poetess admirably comes through the dictum of William Wordsworth when he pronounced that poetry is 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'.

Yes, Kamala Das confesses a number of things exclusively related to her own self as women with her strong feminine sensibilities self as a person with powerful proclivities and antipathies, caprices and whim whams. She does not feel shy of her frailties and virtues as women, her weaknesses as an enlightened companion to an enlightened husband and so on and so forth. About her husband she says: my husband was immersed in his office work, and after work was the dinner followed by sex where was there any tie left for him to want to see the sea or the dark buffaloes the slopes? (Kamala Das 1975: 41)As a poet of love and sex, Kamala Das is hardly ever conventional or conservative. Summer in Calcutta has a fairly good number of poems of love and sex. Some of the poems are about the poetess pure love. She expressed her happiness and contentment in love:

*Until I found you
I write verse drew pictures,
And, went out with friends
For walks.....
Now that I love you,
Curled like an old mongrel,
My life lies, content,
In you.... (Kamala Das 1965, 31)*

In the 20th century, women's writing was considered as a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statements. The last two decades have witnessed phenomenal success in feminist writings of Indian English literature. Today is the generation of those women writers who have money and are mostly western educated. Their novels consist of the latest burning issues related with women as well as those issues that exist in the society since long. These books are thoroughly enjoyed by the masses and the publishers make easy money out of them.

The publishers feel that the literature actually survives because of these types of bold topics and commercials used by the women novelists. They describe the whole world of women with simply stunning frankness. Their write-ups give a glimpse of the unexplored female psyche, which has no accessibility. The majority of these novels depict the psychological suffering of the frustrated housewife.

Indian English writing started with authors like Sarojini Naidu. This great poetess charmed the readers with her writings. Feminism themes have also been used by authors like Nayantara Sahgal and Rama Mehta. Regional fiction theme has been aptly used by Kamala Das, Anita Nair and Susan Viswanathan. Novelists like Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai captured the spirit of Indian cultures and its traditional values. During the 1990`s India became a popular literary nation as a number of women authors made their debut in this era. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Suniti Namjoshi and Anuradha Marwah Roy used realism as main theme of their novels. The list of Indian women novelists also comprises popular names such as Bharati Mukherjee, Nergis Dalal, Krishna Sobti, Dina Mehta, Indira Goswami, Malati Chendur, Gauri Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, Ruth Jhabvala, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri and many more. They are known for the contemporary approach in their novels. The novels of authors like Namita Gokhale or Shobha De are really out-spoken. Most of these female novelists are known for their bold views that are reflected in their novels. Basically, these are the novels of protest and an outburst of reservations and contaminations. Unlike the past, where the works of women novelists were given less priority and were actually undervalued, classification of feministic or male writings hardly makes any sense today.

A close study of her longer poems like 'Composition' reveal that she is a deeply distressed woman. As she remembers the frustrated bygone days of her married life; her feminine self, like a psychiatrist, begins to study the diseased-inner-self. Her feminine consciousness sinks, bit by bit, into the sea of sorrow. And it seems that her feminine self would not come out from the last layer of the sorrowful sea. She remembers the cold and dry days of married life; she complains of her man and the tragic situation. As, she has stated in pessimistic poem Composition: "The tragedy of life in not death but growing. The child growth into adult and growing out of needs ..."

My Story is to date the best-selling woman's autobiography in post-independence India. *My Story* is a chronologically ordered, linear narrative written in a realist style. It follows Kamala's life from age four through British colonial and missionary schools favored by the colonial Indian elite; through her sexual awakening; an early and seemingly disastrous marriage; her growing literary career; extramarital affairs; the birth of her three sons; and, finally, a slow but steady coming to terms with her spouse, writing, and sexuality.

Over the years Kamala has proffered several contradictory accounts of the genesis of *My Story*. In her preface to the autobiography, Kamala claims that she began to write the text in the mid-1970s from her hospital bed as she grappled with a potentially fatal heart condition. She wrote the autobiography, she states, “to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the lime came, with a scrubbed-out conscience” and in order to pay mounting hospital bills. Since the publication of her autobiography, Kamala has repeatedly changed her stance on this topic in interviews and essays.

Most of the poems from her two volumes *The Descendants* and *The old Playhouse* and other poems are filled with warmth and passion, with love and sex. In *The Descendants*, we have some poetic on the subject of love and lust as “a request”, “substitute”, “the invitation”, “captive”, and “convicts”. In her each poem, she points out hard at her husband and wants to escape from him to get freedom. Her feminine self finds the man emotionally deficient and incapable of possessing a passionate regard for concrete reality. Kamala das says that she remained a virgin for a fortnight after marriage as an example of triumph won by her poetic- self or ego- self over her feminine self. A woman always longs for love and this love cannot be one sided. It should be mutual. But instead of the juice of love finds an ‘empty cistern’ in her life. As Saleem Peeradina has discoursed: she writes about the love with the possessiveness of women who can realize her being fully only through love. Not surprisingly, given the subject, the writing is sometimes weak and self indulgent. I conclude that the interest of kamala Das’s poetry deals with not only about the story of sex outside of marriage but also instability of her feelings. Kamala das lends a new dimension to her love poetry by revealing her kinship with an interior Indian tradition which has its root in Indian epics. Apart from this her near background not only provides a suitable background but also strengthens the conventional streak of her poetry. Thus the significant aspects of her love poetry are the merger of two traditions- the Indian and the western. She feels happy by confessing / by peeling off her layers. By reaching closer to the soul and to the bones/ supreme indifference, she openly asserts, I must let my mind striptease/ I must extrude/ autobiography. Search for love is the principal preoccupation of kamala Das’ poetry. She confesses with utmost candors that she ‘began to write poetry with the ignoble aim of wooing a man’.

‘The sunshine Cat’ is a striking poem by das, it strongly revolts the male dominated society and presents a bitter reality of life. Her disappointment, dissatisfaction, and displeasure over the sexual mortification and exploitation that she suffers at the hands of her husband and others who proved to be selfish in their attitude towards love making. Love is only sex for them, spiritual and emotional satisfaction does not mean anything for them. She then wants to forget the bad memories of her husband, seeks love in others but vain every male is same.

She gets only humiliation. She is so disgusted that she wants to wipe away the memories related to them. Her feminine sensibility is at its height, this humiliation causes insanity, she weeps, cries, sobs on her bed and builds walls of tears around her and shut herself in those walls. As:

*“To forget, Oh, to forget... and they said each of
Them, I don't love, I connect love, it is not
In my nature to love, but I cannot love, it is not but I can be kind to you.
They lit her slide from pegs of sanity into
A bed made soft with tears and she lay there weeping,
For sleep had lost its use, I shall build walls with tears
She said walls to shut me in”.*

Das has been a controversial figure, known for her unusual imagery and candor. In poems such as “The Dance of the Eunuchs” and “The Freaks,” Das draws upon the exotic to discuss her sexuality and her quest for fulfillment. In “An Introduction,” Das universalizes and makes public traditionally private experiences, suggesting that women's personal feelings of longing and loss are part of the collective experience of womanhood. In the collection *The Descendants* (1967), the poem “The Maggots” frames the pain of lost love with ancient Hindu myths, while the poem “The Looking-Glass” suggests that women are the Untouchables of love, in that the very things society labels dirty are the things the women are supposed to give. The poem implies that a restrained love seems to be no love at all; only a total immersion in love can do justice to this experience. As a result of love becomes the pervasive themes and it is through love that she endeavors to discover her. As she concerns herself with various facts of love, her love poetry can be divided into two phases. While in the first phase her obsessive concern with physical love is quite prominent, in the second, her drift towards ideal love can be discerned. By ideal love she means the kind or relation that exists between the legendary Radha and Krishna. She yearns for such a love which does not impede her impulse to freedom. Her concept of ideal love is embedded, in the poem ‘the old playhouse’,

*..... Love is narcissus at the water's edge, hunted
By its own lovely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pier, a total freedom, it must will the mirrors
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water.*

The agony of not finding a true lover and a sense of defeat oppress her and she finds no way out of this limbo of sex. She becomes aware of the fact that reliance and body cannot carry her far enough and it is a trap which prevents her from experiencing true love. Kamala das shows with all her lyricism and spontaneity and urgency of purpose. Even she becomes reflective and thoughtful in her utterances about herself:

*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 throats is sinner,
I am saint. I am beloved and the betrayed.*

Her feminine self never gets supposed freedom. The private security of her feminine self is threatened by horror and violence around her. This danger of insecurity brings her face to face with the sea. As her poem 'Substitute' clears the idea. She says:

"It will be all right if I join clubs, and flirt a little over telephone. It will be all right, it will be all right. I warn the type that endures. It will be all right, it will be all right. It will be all right between the world and than me".

Kamala Das has used the expression 'It will be all right' for several times to assert her feminine self. This expression shows her intention. She has used it as a poetic tool to fortify the tension and restlessness of life. Viewed in the light of this peculiar dilemma, the self's ultimate craving for the 'escape from the cage of involvement', is rather spontaneous. This is the effort of her feminine self to assert the feminine identity. The above mentioned poems like 'Suicide', 'Substitute', 'The Invitation' and 'Composition', reveal the death burdened psyche of the self. They project, by and large, the self's confrontation with the complex emotional restlessness caused by the new recognition that despite the positivity of 'body's wisdom' the body itself is the subject to decay.

Her words in her poetry enact her quest, an exploration into herself and seeking of her identity. Her poems are situated neither in the act of sex nor in the feeling of love, they are instead involved with the self and it is varied often conflicting emotions ranging from the desire for security and intimacy to the assertion of ego, self dramatization and feeling of shame and depression. Some scholars have suggested that much of Indian English poetry being written presently is "trash" and "rubbish" and there is a grain of truth about what they say. B.K das in one of his papers remarked "one of the chief dangers to Indian English poetry is the addition of a cart – load of bad poetry to thin body of genuine and good poetry.

She is concerned with external and internal aspects of herself. Kamla Das does not try to adopt the fictional world of others but she looks into herself, her body is her Malgudi. Here, her poetic self neither wants to leave her body nor soul. Kamla Das once again goes to and fro within her inner self as the sea moves in vortex before her. As E.V. Rama Krishna opines: "Since the poet cannot disinherit either the body or the soul and live with one of them, the whole climax of the poem saturates into the idea of suicide where the agency which can take away one of them is the sea, an old symbol of timelessness. As her career progressed, her greatest supporter was always her husband. Even when controversy swirled around Das' sexually charged poetry and her unabashed autobiography, *My Story*, Das' husband was "very proud" of her . Though he was sick for 3 years before he passed away, his presence brought her tremendous joy and comfort. She stated that there "shall not be another person so proud of me and my achievements".

And Das' achievements extend well beyond her verses of poetry. Das says, "I wanted to fill my life with as many experiences as I can manage to garner because I do not believe that one can get born again". True to her word, Das has dabbled in painting, fiction, and even politics. Though Das failed to win a place in Parliament in 1984, she has been much more successful of late as a syndicated columnist. She has moved away from poetry because she claims that "poetry does not sell in this country," but fortunately her forthright columns do Das's columns sound off on everything from women's issues and child care to politics.

But, her illusive freedom in the lap of the sea is over shadowed by the painful memory of her love-affairs within and without the orbit of marriage; Frustrated in married life and the breaking of the emotional ties from her husband are symbolically present in *The Bangles*. The bangles in India are considered as a symbol of matrimonial relation. Kamala Das seems to present the discontentment and disharmony in the marital relationship through the following lines : " ... At night, In sleep, the woman lashes, At pillows with bangled arms; In Vain she begs bad dreams to fade. The man switches on the light and Looks into her face with his Gray, pitiless eyes ..

Many protesters are roaming around. M.k.Naik also thinks that the new Indian English poet has not so far produced a single work which can be hailed as acknowledge masterpiece.

It will be interesting to contrast kamala Das's treatment of the love of Radha & Krishna motif with that of Sarojini Naidu. In her poem "Ghanshyam" Sarojini Naidu depicts Krishna not her as her lover but as god who is omniscient and omnipotent and is the central principal of this universe.

*Thou givest to the shadows on the mountains
The colours of thy glory, ghanshyam
Thy laughter to high secret snow-fed mountains.
To forest pines thy healing breath of balm.
Thou lendest to the storm's unbridled tresses
The beauty and the blackness of the hair...*

The poem is written in the form of Stotra, a hymn in praise of god. The tone of the poem suggests the high seriousness of a devotee. She offers the lord not her body like kamala das but he “yearning soul”: “O take my yearning soul for thine oblation”. Kamala Das, on the other hand, considers Krishna as her “mate” who comes to her in “myriad forms” and to whom “in many shapes shall I surrender... I shall be fondled by Him.

Kamala Das's mysterious honesty is wholly extended to her exploration of womanhood and love. According to her, womanhood calls for a specific set of collective experiences. Again, Kamala Das's attention towards eroticism is magnificently coupled with her exploration of women's needs. According to her, love should be determined by a fanatical kind of unconditional honesty. An encumbered love seems to be no love at all; only a total raptness in love can do justice such varied experiences. Much like the makers of ancient Tantric art, Das made no effort to conceal the sensuality of the human form; her work appears to commemorate its cheerful potential, while acknowledging its co-occurring perils.

Kamala Das's poems when focused upon love treat it within more panoptic ranges of themes, more realized settings and with deeper feeling, bringing to it an intensity of emotion and speech. The rich, full complexity of life is wholly grasped in Das's writings. Her themes travel beyond stereotyped yearnings and complaints. Even her feelings of lonesomeness and distress are part of a larger-than-life personality, obsessive in its consciousness of its self, yet, weaving a drama of selfhood. In her poem "An Introduction" from Summer in Calcutta, the narrator says, "I am every/ Woman who seeks love" (de Souza 10). Though Amar Dwivedi criticizes Das for this "self imposed and not natural" universality, this feeling of oneness permeates her poetry (303). In Das' eyes, womanhood involves certain collective experiences. Indian women, however, do not discuss these experiences in deference to social mores.

Das consistently refuses to accept their silence. Feelings of longing and loss are not confined to a private misery. They are invited into the public sphere and acknowledged. Das seems to insist they are normal and have been felt by women across time. In "The Maggots" from the collection, *The Descendants*, Das corroborates just how old the sufferings of women are. She frames the pain of lost love with ancient Hindu myths. On their last night together, Krishna asks Radha if she is disturbed by his kisses. Radha says, "No, not at all, but thought, What is/ It to the corpse if the maggots nip?". Radha's pain is searing, and her silence is given voice by Das. Furthermore, by making a powerful goddess prey to such thoughts, it serves as a validation for ordinary women to have similar feeling. Critical response to Das's poetry has been intimately connected to critical perception of her personality and politics; her provocative poetry has seldom produced lukewarm reactions. While reviewers of Das's early poetry have praised its fierce originality, bold images, exploration of female sexuality, and intensely personal voice, they lamented that it lacked attention to structure and craftsmanship.

Significantly, many of her poems in English are about the warmth of her childhood and the family home in Kerala. Similar to other South Indian writers, this Indian poetess was also fond of writing about memories of childhood, family relations, and the family's great house. In Kamala Das's poetry there lies an idealized time of childhood in *My Grandmother's House*, when she felt the sanctuary of love within familiar surroundings innocent of sexual fears and frustrations. Despite the fickle alterations of mood, attitude and self-respect in her poetry, there is an inner nucleus of identity to which Das refers: her name and aristocratic blood, her mother's family, life in the South and her youth in contrast to her marriage.

Coupled with her exploration of women's needs is an attention to eroticism. The longing to lose one's self in passionate love is discussed in "The Looking Glass" from *The Descendants*. The narrator of the poem urges women to give their man "what makes you women". The things which society suggests are dirty or taboo are the very things which the women are supposed to give. The "musk of sweat between breasts/ the warm shock of menstrual blood" should not be hidden from one's beloved. In the narrator's eyes, love should be defined by this type of unconditional honesty. A woman should "Stand nude before the glass with him," and allow her lover to see her exactly as she is. Likewise, the woman should appreciate even the "fond details" of her lover, such as "the jerky way he/ Urinates". Even if the woman may have to live "Without him" someday, the narrator does not seem to favor bridling one's passions to protect one's self. A restrained love seems to be no love at all; only a total immersion in love can do justice to this experience. Much like the creators of ancient Tantric art, Das makes no attempt to hide the sensuality of the human form; her work seems to celebrate its joyous potential while acknowledging its concurrent dangers.

There lies a dualism in Kamala Das's writings in English, in which soul is contrasted to body. She seemed to imagine overwhelming this dualism only through death; Das's poems are filled with yearnings for death, especially to drown in the sea, water being connected in her mind with an all-encompassing universal calmness, formlessness in contrast to the conscious mind and body of the anxious individual. The dualism results from the fall from childhood innocence into the adult realm of sexuality, marriage and life amongst strangers. Rather than a poet of free love, Kamala Das elucidates the disenchantment of sexuality.

In her "Songs of Radha", Sarojini Naidu describes the restlessness, anxiety and pain Radha experiences in waiting for her lover, Krishna. Her songs are rhythmic and have a musical appeal, while Kamala Das poems are short and highly personal. While spontaneity characterizes Sarojini's poems, brooding and meditation permeate Kamala Das's poems. In Sarojini Naidu the Radha-Krishna relationship is a metaphor for that between atman and Brahman, in Kamala Das the relationship, though one of ideal lovers is realized in human terms and as such it does not rise to "the divine level". Sarojini Naidu's Radha is not anti-sexual, yet sex is not the primary concern in Radha poems. But in Kamala Das sex implies a "deep and intense relationship" which is not devotional; it is very much human in its concern. Fritz Blackwell rightly observes that the poet's "concern is literary and existential, not religious; she is using a religious concept for a literary motif and metaphor". Thus Kamala Das love poems stand apart as they fruitfully combine the indigenous traditions such as Abhisarika and Sahaja and the confessional tradition which is western. Her love poetry is a fine blending of the literary traditions.

Drawing upon religious and domestic imagery to explore a sense of identity, Das tells of intensely personal experiences, including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside of marriage, and her life in matriarchal rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home. Since the publication of *Summer in Calcutta*, Das has been a controversial figure, known for her unusual imagery and candor. In poems such as "The Dance of the Eunuchs" and "The Freaks," Das draws upon the exotic to discuss her sexuality and her quest for fulfillment. In "An Introduction," Das makes public traditionally private experiences, suggesting that women's personal feelings of longing and loss are part of the collective experience of womanhood. In the collection *The Descendants* (1967), the poem "The Maggots" frames the pain of lost love with ancient Hindu myths, while the poem "The Looking-Glass" suggests that the very things society labels taboo are the things that women are supposed to give. In *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), poems such as "Substitute," "Gino," and "The Suicide" examine physical love's failure to provide fulfillment, escape from the self, and exorcism of the past, whereas poems such as "The Inheritance" address the integrity of the artistic self in the face of religious fanaticism.

Kamala Das has used the expression 'It will be all right' for several times to assert her feminine self. This expression shows her intention. She has used it as a poetic tool to fortify the tension and restlessness of life. Viewed in the light of this peculiar dilemma, the self's ultimate craving for the 'escape from the cage of involvement', is rather spontaneous. This is the effort of her feminine self to assert the feminine identity. The above mentioned poems like 'Suicide', 'Substitute', 'The Invitation' and 'Composition', reveal the death burdened psyche of the self. They project, by and large, the self's confrontation with the complex emotional restlessness caused by the new recognition that despite the positivity of 'body's wisdom' the body itself is the subject to decay. Her next effort to assert her feminine self can be seen in her important poem 'The Invitation'. Her husband could not provide her a paradise of love she had dreamed of. But her feminine self never forgets its cry-for-love. She finds it difficult to adjust the barrenness of her married life. Her feminine self goes deep into her own self-revealing mysteries. It becomes clear by this saying that her husband has shattered all her romantic ideas about love and home. Her husband hurt her feelings and evoked a sense of despair in her.

She says:

"... A long, As I remember I want to other on the bed with him, the boundaries of had shrunk to a mere six by two and afterwards, when we walked out together, they widened to hold the unknown city ... End me, cries the sea. Think of yourself lying on a funeral pyre with a burning head ..."

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