

SHEDDING THE LAYERS OF FALSE SELF IN THE POEMS OF KAMALA DAS

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Abstract

The present paper, “Shedding the Layers of False Self in the Poems of Kamala Das” examines and analyses the poetic world of the poetess concerned. It depicts the poetic concerns from a female perspective with the purpose of identifying the poetess’s strategy of response to the forces of oppression that exists in a gendered society. It attempts to analyse why Kamala Das may have chosen the confessional voice as her mode of poetic expression. In her poems we can find the psychic disintegration which results, when self-rejects established norms and tries to find her true self by shedding off the layers of the false self.

Keywords:

Kamala Das, Confessional Poetry, Gendered Society, Poetic Expression

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Since primeval times poetry has been a vehicle to define society and culture, to comment on the prevailing conditions of the society and tell universal stories. From primordial times, the flow of words with a cadence has been the indigenous quality of India, as well as the rest of the world. The goddess of wisdom and knowledge, Sarasvati, the Hindu Goddess of Learning and the Arts has bestowed our land with plenty of lyrical men and women. The Vedas, hymns, ragas, and other forms of poetry have been in its blood. The contribution of legendary poets, writers like Tulsidas and Kalidas is noteworthy. The tradition of Indian poetry in English begins with Henry Louis Derozio (1831-1909). He was a poet as well as teacher of poetry who wrote on the lines of the English Romantics. Next to Derozio, in poetic ingenuity and influence was Kashiprosad Ghose (1809-1873). He was one of the first Indians to publish a volume of verse. Michael Madhusudan Dutt was a poet who wrote in both Bengali and English. Directly or indirectly, they participated in the Indian Renaissance movement in the nineteenth century. Toru Dutt (1856-1877) wrote on Indian legends, on love of nature and tender memories of childhood. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) entered the scene of Indian English writing after making noteworthy contributions to Bengali literature. He wrote about “romantic longings, devotion to God and simple love of created things.”¹

Compared with Tagore, Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) wrote in English and not in Bengali. The next in the series, Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) was a poet of passion and emotion – she wrote on Indian themes, on love and sorrow. After independence, Indian poetry in English shifted from the Romantic, socio-cultural and spiritual-transcendental emphasis to that of personal experience. P. Lal and K.Raghavendra Rao called this new poetry, the espouser of “the private voice, especially because we live in an age that tends so easily to demonstrations of mass approval and hysteria.”² It was for this reason that they decided to “celebrate the lyric form as best suited for the capsule minded people.”³ P.Lal, Nissim Ezekiel, A.K. Ramanujan, Shiv K. Kumar, Pritish Nandy and Kamala Das formed a group that caused a stir in Indian poetry in English. They were followed by another generation of poets like Mamta Kalia, Gouri Deshpande, Eunice de Souza and Jayanta Mahapatra, all of whom were to explore the ‘personal’ with only very few achieving that intent.

The tradition of writing poetry in India reaches far back to the tribal songs, hymns, Vedas etc. of ancient India, the Pali songs of the Buddhist nuns of the 6th century BC, the Sangam poets of Tamil, the devotional poets of the middle ages, especially Akka Mahadevi and Jana bai. References to women poets are found in the Vedic period and some parts of the Vedas are attributed to them. In Sanskrit, a woman called Silabhattarika, of whom nothing is known, regrets the fact that she married the man who was her lover, because their lovemaking has become so much less interesting than it was before. Another poem, also by a woman (Bhavadevi), writing in Sanskrit on a similar theme, reads:

At first our bodies knew a perfect oneness,
but then grew two:
the lover, you
and I, unhappy I, the loved
Now you are the husband, I the wife.
What else should come of this my life,
a tree too hard to break,
if not such bitter fruit.⁴

However, the earliest example of women's poetry is in the Pali language, the language of the Buddha, which dates to more than 2500 years ago. The collection of poems, Therigatha is by Buddhist women monks, many of them ex-courtesans. This poetry is abstinent and disparaging of fleshly pleasures, emphasizing the impermanence of flesh as stated in "Amrapali": "Full and lovely in contour rose of yore the small breasts of me. They with the waste of the years droop shrunken as slain without water."⁵ Or, as Eunice De Souza observes in her introduction to *Nine Indian Women Poets*, "Women have been writing poetry in India since about 1000 B.C. on religious and secular themes, and it is among these rather more distant ancestors that contemporary women writers are likely to find congenial voices and styles."⁶ Among the hymns in the Vedas is an example of a woman Apala who was rejected by her husband due to her skin disease, so she prays to Indra: "Make these three places sprout, O Indra; my daddy's head and field, and this part of me below my waist."⁷ Again, we can see some examples of middle class unconventionality in the era of *bhakti*, where Jana Bai and many

others, wrote poems considering Krishna their soul mate and sacrificed their worldliness to become one with 'Him.'

Further, this tradition of women writers continues to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it reaches up to the celebrated Malayali poet, Balamani Amma, Kamala Das's mother. Indian women writing in English dates to the second half of the 19th century and to its pioneers, Toru Dutt and Aru Dutt. The first phase of Indian English writing ended around 1950. The spirit of patriotism inspired the poetry of the later period. As I.K. Sharma rightly puts:

Subjects of higher attitude were adopted and enlivened in poetry. It was not unnatural too, since the writers were fed upon Indian philosophy and western and Indian classics at home and in college ... Like a Himalayan bear, it was massive and heavy. In short, poetry written during this period was, by and large, a hymn to the glory that was India.⁸

The spirit of nationalism was dominating their minds, so they made little attempt to shake off the ensconced poetic conventions. They were too engrossed with the fervour of freedom and obviously, freedom to them meant only political freedom, that is, freedom from the shackles of the Britishers and it was for this that nationalist –poets struggled. Thus, modern Indian poetry in English has been a post- independence phenomenon. The poets of the earlier time had yet to break with the poetic conventions and idiom of their colonizers. The poetry before independence was in more harmony with Victorian romanticism and was represented by Aurobindo Ghose and others who owing to an inability to substitute an adequate idiom had to suffer considerable marginalization. Therefore, the task of an innovative mode of writing fell on the new generation of poets for whom a postcolonial context was gradually taking shape. The new poets had to take upon themselves a challenge and break new ground in a new poetic tradition, as they could not fall back upon their predecessors. To quote Bruce King, "Poetry of the pre-independence period was, the writers felt, a mass of sentiments, cliché's, outdated language and conventions, the ossified remains of a colonial tradition badly in need of a new start through grafting on a vital body of contemporary verse and contact with contemporary life and speech."⁹

The first thirteen years can be seen mainly as a stepping-stone or the preliminary stage, notwithstanding the fact that Nissim Ezekiel had brought out the first four volumes of his poetry

and important literary journals like *Thought*, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Literary Criterion*, and *Opinion* were established during this period. The inception of post- independence poetry was only in the sixties with the young and gratis poets taking control of the literary scene. The young poets did not communicate feelings of patriotism or any other kind of sentimentalism, but they talked about themselves: of love, frank confessions of the dissatisfactions of an arranged marriage and the intensity of sexual desire for the first time in Indian English poetry. The women poets epitomized themselves as dissenters and articulated their desires, lust, sexuality and experiences of child-bearing. They augmented Indian English poetry with a wealth of new themes and experiences. They pioneered an iconoclastic discourse to portray their subdued desires. In such times of upheaval, there blazed a new trail as Kamala Das created the ambience for revelatory confessional poetry with many other poets of her time like Monika Verma, Gouri Pant, Laxmi Kannan, Anna Sujatha Modayil, Mamta Kalia and Eunice de Souza.

In her poetry, there is a certain awareness, retrospection, a looking inward, delving deep into the recesses of her soul. Her poems are about desire, love, and emotional involvement. She radiates the two hues of a polarized content, which is necessary for a unified vision of life. Her first collection of poems created a minor storm when it was released but it won her instant recognition with her uninhibited treatment of sex. The explicitness and honesty with which she admitted her feelings rattled many conservative minds. Pain, anguish and despair are woven into the fabric of her poetry.

There is a certain intensity of feeling permeating “The Freaks”:

The heart,
An empty cistern
Waiting through long hours, fills itself
With coiling snakes of silence ... *Summer in Calcutta*, 8.

Born at Punnayurkulum, a village in Malabar, South Kerala, on 31 March 1934, when India was still a part of the British Empire, Kamala Das was a born mutineer, and lived till 31st May 2009. The society of that time was orthodox and traditional. The property of the father flowed to the daughters and their children in a matriarchal and matrilineal society. In such a social set up as this, women were economically independent though their advisors were men. The women of Kamala’s family “... did not sit in the presence of their uncles, brothers and sons

and would eat only after the men had had their fill.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, Kamala Das, despite the age-old tradition of treating women as sheer commodities, was a dissenter. Her father, V.M.Nair, worked for a British automobile firm of which he later became the Managing Director. Afterwards, he switched over to journalism and took over as the Managing Director of one of the oldest Malayali dailies, *Mathribhumi*. Her mother Balamani Amma, is a poet of great merit. Her maternal granduncle, Nalapat Narayan Menon, was a famous poet, theosophist and well reputed scholar of Malabar. It was a large joint family where all the members lived in the Edenic Nalapat House with idyllic surroundings.

Even in this big, united family, the children often felt like derelicts. As Kamala Das writes in *My Story*, “My father was always busy with his work at the automobile firm where he was employed, selling Rolls Royce My mother, vague and indifferent, spent her time lying on her belly on a large four post bed, composing poems in Malayam.”¹¹ Despite a highly intellectual family set up, Das received a paltry amount of formal education. She was not allowed to complete her matriculation though she was exposed to the English language from a very early age because of her father’s job in Calcutta in the British company. Her creativity is influenced by many traditions: the regional cultural tradition of Kerala and the pan- Indian tradition, and within the regional tradition she has a specifically matrilineal background provided by her caste, and a specific provincial background offered by Malabar, where she spent her childhood. She is also heir to two poetic traditions, that of Malayalam, whose roots go back into the ancient Tamil Sangam poetry and medieval folklore, and that of Indian English poetry beginning with Henri Derozio and Toru Dutt. She had two poets in the family, Balamani Amma, her mother and Nalapat Narayan Menon, her maternal uncle. All these have directly or indirectly gone into the making of her poems.

She and her brother were admitted to a Catholic English school where they were treated as outsiders or aliens among white children. She was made aware that her brown skin was a disadvantage to her country, which was ruled by the white man. She speaks about “the tortures we underwent at school for wearing under the school uniform of white twill a nut-brown skin.”¹² Right from her childhood, being maudlin, she felt the pain of being born with nut-brown skin. Ill-fatedly, her autocratic father forced marriage on her before her sixteenth birthday simply

because she “flunked in arithmetic.”¹³ Several times, she refers to his autocratic ways and how he would dictate the rules of the household, insisting that they be followed. She remembers how he would ‘roar’ and how he would force her and her brother to swallow castor oil. Similarly, he threatened her:

“He had warned me that if I did not do well in Maths, he would marry me off. Unfortunately, I could never do well in Maths, and hence I was married off as a punishment.”¹⁴

Therefore, marriage was a punishment given to a girl at the tender age of sixteen. She was married to one of her pale looking cousins whether she liked it or not. She was sentenced to a life of domesticity with a man who was thin, walking with a stoop and had bad teeth as “it was customary for the Nair girl to marry when she was hardly out of her childhood.”¹⁵ Moreover, she tells us, “Until my wedding night I did not have the slightest knowledge of what went on between men and women in the process of procreation.”¹⁶ Not surprisingly, her relationship with her husband “... was like a chieftain who collected the taxes due to him from his vessel, simply and without exhilaration.”¹⁷ She hardly had the maturity to comprehend the consequences of marriage as reflected here:

Obedience was not one of my strong points. It was a great relief when my relatives suggested marriage as a chastener, and before my sixteenth birthday I slipped out of my parents’ home and its uneasy calm.¹⁸

She started writing at the age of six. Her first poem was about a doll that had lost its head and had to remain headless for eternity: “I was six and very sentimental. I wrote sad poems about dolls that lost their heads and had to remain headless for eternity.”¹⁹ As Das recalls, “Each poem of mine made me cry. My brother illustrated the verse and wrote faintly political articles.”²⁰ Das, soon after marriage, became fond of her husband despite his lustful attempts to overpower her tender, tired, bruised supple body. She had expected love, conversation, companionship and warmth as she writes in *My Story*:

“I had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms the loneliness of my life...”²¹ She remained a virgin for a period of a fortnight as her juvenile body was not ready to take him and her mind was too tender for having anything to do with love-making. With trauma of a forced marriage as her stimulus, she wrote her first serious poem while still in her teens:

Wipe out the paints, unmould the clay;
Let nothing remain of that yesterday

At the age of sixteen, her first son was born, though, as she says in an interview, “... I was mature enough to be a mother only when my third child was born.”²²

Her husband often played a fatherly role for both Das and her sons because of the age difference between them. He used to encourage her to associate with people of her own age. Das says that he was always “very understanding”. However, deep down, her heart was bruised, lovelorn and felt deprived, disgruntled and estranged further from her husband. The passing years benumbed her body and soul making her weary of her wifely duties as she writes in “The Old Playhouse”:

You called me wife,
I was taught to break saccharine into your tea and
To offer at the right moment the vitamins. Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf. “The Old Playhouse and Other Poems”, 1.

She craved for love and happiness but in her quest of love and companionship, she lost her true self. In the quest of ultimate love or true love, many men came and went in her life, leaving her soul parched as ever. This kind of love became a mirage to reach and she became a nymphomaniac, making love with the body while the mind used to fantasize about some other partner as she apologizes:

... yet Goutama
That other owns me; while your arms hold
My woman- form, his hurting arms
Hold my very soul.” “An Apology to Goutam”, 18.

She broke all the social norms and confessed:

Freedom became my dancing shoe,
 how well I danced,
 and danced without rest,
 until the shoes turned grimy on my feet
 and I began to have doubts. “Composition”, 4.

Kamala passed through various stages of depression, nervous breakdowns, did not know what to do, fell sick many times even to the verge of death, and with passing years had to do little with the business called living. Nevertheless, like a phoenix she rose from her ashes. She started taking long walks as if to escape her present but did not know that such a traveller would ultimately reach her starting place. She started shedding her clothes, regarding them as traps and sat for hours staring at a dot or a point on the wall without blinking. She started pining for her ‘Krishna’ and turned religious but to no use, for Krishna she felt was not outside but deep inside her heart. Like Sylvia Plath she showed suicidal tendencies. She started to look upon death as a medium of salvation as in her *MyStory* she confesses: “Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness”²³

The poetry of Kamala Das depicts her dual nature / character. The ‘two selves’ continuously struggle to overcome one another. In most of her poems, we can see the real ‘Kamala Das i.e. Kamala Das as a poet, protester and a love seeker. And her other self as an ideal mother, wife and daughter. Such personality with two ‘selves’, two faces or characters in a person is generally termed as split-self or split personality.

The term split self was first given significance for women’s poetry in Florence Howe’s, *Introduction to No More Masks*. It describes an opposition woman feel between essential aspects of the self, between what is socially prescribed based on gender and what is defined on the basis of the self, between what a woman feels she is and what a society wants her to feel. Kamala Das has written a substantial number of poems exploring this duality, the pain and frustrations. She particularly identifies the two selves, one is the wife, mother, daughter, the roles forced upon her by society and other self is what, she really is –a poet. Louis Bernikovnotes,” A woman poet constantly pits herself against cultural expectation of ‘Womanhood’ and ‘woman’s Writing’. All her outpourings are in the form of verse or prose, adding something to the quest of identity in the

patriarchal society. Every woman writer has to deal with the realization that men write out of experience that is 'Universal', but her experience is likely to be regarded as trivial and private. Virginia Woolf believed that until a woman writer could 'kill' her 'angel' she would be incomplete in her truths. "This compulsiveness, the cause of female socialization, is the perennial enemy of female artists."²⁴ "For a woman to attain knowledge and self-realization is necessarily to find herself outside a society that ritually and actually enacts loss of self for women. Similarly, in modern confessional as an extension of the Adamic tradition the stance of Everyman is readily available to the male poet. It is expected that, personally alienated and desperate as his voice may be, it is still the voice of his time... yet for the female confessional poet, there is not the same extension. She is not Everyman and is hardly Everywoman."²⁵

A traditional female is bound to the enclosed world of house hold chores. In her guise as a mother, wife, daughter she exhibits passivity and obedience. The artists, however, inhabits an unbounded world of independence, movement and vitality. Her true 'self' wants to be free like a 'bud' and break the shackles of role playing. The female artists become indifferent mother, a poor house keeper, a woman who disregards her social convention, keeps her as exotic eccentric figure. So, is the case with Kamala Das whose poetry goes beyond stereo-typed longing and complaint. Her work is a compelling account of the presence of split. She redefines herself and liberates herself both as a woman and a poet. She makes a journey into deep recesses of her heart and jot down her experience while traveling inside herself.

Kamala Das's poetry originates from self which functions like a poetic nucleus. An analysis of her poems reveal that the woman persona of her poems represents her 'own mutilated self' tormented by both past and present and which results in deep sense of crisis. 'Self' has a center whose circumference is everywhere, and Kamala tries to come to her center again and again. Stripping, sexual neurosis in poem after poem, shifting and re shifting does not lead personality reconstitution, far less to transformation, yet Kamala tries to reach her goal of discovering her 'self' through the hazardous journey of confession. The split –self poem deals primarily with a sense of isolation; a poet feels between her social female self and the inner artists. The "Suicide" throws light on the poet's problem of identity:

But

I must pose
I must pretend
I must act the role
Of happy woman

Happy wife. *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems*, 35.

The female persona portrayed in her poems is a complex one. It is so partly because Kamala Das reveals her feminine sensibility in diverse roles such as wife, beloved, daughter, sister granddaughter, mother, mistress and even nymphomaniac. “Kamala Das has more to say about the pathos of a woman emerging from a passive role to the point of discovering and asserting her individual freedom and identity....”²⁶

To ‘strip tease’ her hankered and hapless soul and as a psychic necessity or to unleash her spiritual hunger she started vomiting out herself in the form of words. Her early poems are primarily concerned with her marriage, love life, and desire for intimacy. It is as if she dies to her human self only to be reborn as an artist, as she claims in *MyStory*: “Like the phoenix I rose from the ashes of my past.”²⁷ Faced with the sense of absolute dissatisfaction and loneliness, she turned to poetry for its cathartic release. Therefore, lyrics became a second skin and her obsession oozed out “There is some discovery which I made recently that while I live I cannot write and while I write I cannot live. Either live or write poetry. I cannot do both at the same time.”²⁸ It is difficult for Kamala Das to integrate the external socially acceptable integrated feminine woman to co-exist with the internal or rebellious, unfeminine isolated artist, who is not acceptable and so she confesses. Her poems describe her as two co-existent women who are in a varying degree of tension with each other.

Kamala Das wrote many novels, poetry collections and short stories in English as well as in the Indian language of Malayalam under the name ‘Madhavikutty’. Some of her works in English include the novel *Alphabet of Lust* (1977), a collection of short stories called *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992), *A Doll for the Child Prostitute* (1977), poetry collections *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973) and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996). With PritishNandy, she published *Tonight This Savage Rite: The Love Poetry of Kamala Das and PritishNandy* (1979). Her *Collected*

Poems was published in 1984, and her autobiography in 1976. She was awarded a P.E.N Prize in 1964, the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for fiction in 1969, the Chaman Lal award for journalism in 1971, the Asian World Prize for Literature in 1985, and the Indira Priyadarshini Vrikshamitra Award in 1988. She was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the World Academy of Arts and Culture, Taiwan, in 1984, as well as The Vayalar Award, The Ezhuthachchan Award, N.V. Krishna Warriar Award, Sahitya Parishad Award. She was nominated in 1984 for the Nobel Prize for literature. She worked as poetry editor, *Illustrated Weekly of India*. She travelled to read poetry to Germany's Essen, Bonn and Duisburg Universities, the Adelaide Writers' Festival, Frankfurt Book Fair, University of Kingston, Jamaica, Singapore and the South Banks Festival London, Concordia University Montreal, Canada, and Columbia University, New York. Her works are available in many languages like German, French, and Spanish.

Das's themes go beyond stereotyped longings and complaints. Even her feelings of isolation and disenchantment are part of a larger-than-life personality. Many of her poems are about the warmth of her childhood at "My Grandmothers' House" when she felt the security of love, freedom, in contrast to her present insecurity:

... you cannot believe, darling,
Can you, that I lived in such a house and
Was proud, and loved ... I who have lost
My way and beg now at strangers' doors to
Receive love, at least in small change? *Summer in Calcutta*, 13.

Writing for her is an appetite, a psychic stipulation, a spiritual hunger or the 'striptease of the soul', her attempt to attain a sense of totality, unifying and unified vision of life as a literary artist. She uses over exposure and sexual undertones as a technique, a literary device used sometimes to negate, or to generate in the reader a desired aversion and disgust. She confesses, unleashes her parched soul through women's voices and searches for the true self. This search leads her to the path of God through her poetry and to be the persona in the poem imagining herself to be Radha questing for the ideal Krishna.

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