

Autobiographical and Confessional Note in the Poetry of Kamala Das

Beena Khati

Research Scholar

Department of English

DSB Campus, Nainital

Kumaun University, Uttarakhand

Abstract

The present paper entitled “Autobiographical and Confessional Note in the Poetry of Kamala Das” is an attempt at shedding light on the poetry of one of most distinguished of Indo-English poets Kamala Das with special reference to autobiographical and confessional note in her poems. Kamala Das’ poetry belongs to the school of Confessional Poetry that emerged in the United States of America during the 1950s, and it included poets like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Allen Ginsberg and Anne Sexton. Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu’s poetry also reflected elements of confessional poetry although Kamala Das is best known Indo-English poet in the confessional mode. It is often described as poetry in a first person or ‘I’ and it focuses on an individual’s personal experiences, the psyche, fits of emotions, and unconventional matters such as sexuality, and suicide. It is also to be noted that there is a difference between autobiographical and confessional. Autobiographical poetry concerns with something that happened in the life of the poet whereas Confessional poetry concerns with something that is too personal or even shameful to recount. All poetry can be autobiographical but not all poetry can be confessional. Kamala Das’ poetry is both autobiographical and confessional in the sense that she talks about her real events and at the same time there are honest confessions and bold treatment of her private life. It is devoid of a sense of remorse or inhibition.

Keywords: Confessional Mode, Love, Carnal Desire, Disillusionment, Frustration

Introduction

The poetry of Kamala Das (1934-2009) is marked by extreme sincerity and integrity. She was one of the most distinctive and original of Indian poets writing in English. Her poems find an exquisite place in all anthologies of Indo-English poetry. Her poetry is an outpouring of her love-longings, failure in love, frustrations, and disillusionments that is characterized by the ever present autobiographical and confessional overtones that she most candidly and boldly brings in

her poems. In her poetry, she has brought forth various stages of her life from childhood to married life and then post marriage period. Her poetry can be called a kind of ‘psychological striptease’ that she herself enacts and at the center of her poetry is her own personality i.e., her ‘personal self’ and the most striking feature of her poems are honest confessions.

Kamala Das has been called a poet in the confessional mode. A confessional poet talks about personal emotional experiences which are normally considered as taboo. Confessional poetry is highly, in fact, all autobiographical because it stems from real life experiences of the poet. To be a successful poet, T. S. Eliot emphasized on the Theory of Impersonal Poetry by stressing that a poet should do away with the ‘personal’ or ‘subjective’ part in him and poetry should be independent of its poet. According to Eliot, poetry is an ‘escape from emotion’. However, in case of confessional mode of poetry, the personal part of the poet is of utmost importance and there is no escape from emotion but an expression of it with spontaneity. Kamala Das achieves impersonality by rising to the universal and general from the personal and particular. Her intensely personal experiences turn into a general truth.

Kamala Das’ first anthology entitled “*Summer in Calcutta*” came out in 1965 and it contained fifty poems. Her poetic tone was established through this very first publication and it was to continue throughout her subsequent works. Most of these poems, with few exceptions, had the theme of love, or failure in love. In the poem “*My Grandmother’s House*”, the poet reminisces about the happy carefree childhood she spent at her family- home in Malabar in the company of her doting grandmother. There is a profound nostalgic yearning for the past when her grandmother showered her unconditional love and affection on the poet. The grandmother is fondly remembered in a number of poems and serves as a source of Das’s happy childhood that symbolized love and protection. The poet says;

There is a house now far away where once
I received love...That woman died,
The house withdrew into silence, (My Grandmother’s House)

Kamala Das herself wrote “From every city I have lived, I have remembered the noons in Malabar with an ache growing inside me, a home-sickness”. The old Malabar house provided her love, security and protection but with her grandmother’s death everything vanished forever. The world outside, the city life is monotonous, unwelcoming and defiled to the poet. Kamala Das in the poem “*A Hot Noon in Malabar*” contrasts her happy past with miserable present. In the past everything was familiar, full of innocence and charm. “*The Blood*”, a long poem in which the poet reminisces her happy past, also evokes her yearning for the old house at Malabar and the grandmother who is no more alive. Again, it’s an autobiographical poem full of wistful nostalgia for the good old days that have passed away and her mind is preoccupied with the thoughts of death and decay.

The theme of love or rather the failure in love is pervasive in her poems. Married at an early age she found herself bound to an empty relationship. Her marriage had not been a happy one and as a result there was a sense of loneliness, disillusionment and frustration. Thus, the bitter experience of married life occurs throughout her poetry and the search for spiritual gratification continues. She had bore three children but she did not find the nuptial bliss which a woman craves for. She does not advocate adultery or infidelity but searches for a relationship which gives both love and security. In one of her poems "*The Freaks*", both the woman and her partner are freaks, who deviate in some or other way and do not behave in the way as expected of them. The relationship as portrayed in the poem is forced one, they try to make love and think of love but keep wandering off from love. She says;

...while our minds
Are willed to race towards love;
But, they only wander, tripping
Idly over puddles of
Desire... (The Freaks)

There is no emotional connection between the male partner and the woman. Her own marriage was a loveless one and in the poem also the woman is there merely to fulfill the lust of the man. The physical desire is impure because it is bereft of any spark of love. Their hearts are compared to "empty cisterns" meaning sterile and barren. The long hours of waiting to fill the cisterns of their hearts with water of love prove to be futile as their hearts do not get filled with love but 'coiling snakes of silence'. This silence is killing and terrifying to her heart with its repulsive and horrible nature. She contemplates on her freakish nature and wonders if it's she who is incapable of love and therefore is sterile. She puts on a brave face, a façade, to pose as if she is moved with intense carnal desire. It is her defense tool to cover for her inadequacy.

The poetry of Kamala Das is a reflection of modern woman's life in all its nakedness and she quite flippantly through her own experiences conveys the unconventional and hidden truths of private life of a woman. In another poem "The looking-Glass", the poet again talks about the lustful relationship and the frustration resulting from lack of emotional fulfillment. In this poem the poet says the woman should admire male body and give herself over to him altogether. This is the conventional role which man expects woman to play in order to gratify his carnal desire. "The Looking-Glass" faithfully mirrors the working of male-dominated society where women are mere objects of lust gratification which is a momentary pleasure for a man but the woman yearns for emotional bond and when she is denied emotional fulfillment there is humiliation and frustration. Her own married life was like that of a trapped bird in a cage at the whims of male ego subjected to providing entertainment and pleasure.

Her poem "*The Sunshine Cat*" narrates the miserable lot of a woman who was subjected to suffering and humiliation at the hands of her own husband as well as other men. She loved

only one of them but they were all same in their attitudes. She wanted to withdraw from life and in her room her only companion was a streak of sunlight which she imagined to be a yellow cat. She reconciled to the four walls of domesticity quite like a yellow cat, a domestic animal. Her imprisoned life in that room turned her into a hair thin line like the sunshine cat as her physical health declined. She withered before her time and was no longer desirable or of any use to man. Kamala Das wants to convey that such is the lot of woman who are expected to perform the roles of wives and daughter without thinking about their own lives. The poet says;

Noticed that the cat of sunshine was only a
Line, a hair-thin line, and in the evening when
He returned to take her out, she was a cold and
Half-dead woman, now of no use at all to men.(The Sunshine Cat)

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by saying that Kamala Das's poetry is therapeutic because being autobiographical and confessional, it aims at making the readers understand the psyche of the character and in the process of revealing the inner conflicts and thoughts, and the character experiences a healing therapy. She was an unconventional woman and had an extremely modern point of view which is vividly reflected in her poetry. The woman persona of her poems represents the poet's own personality. Devendra Kohli remarks that "her poetry is in the final analysis an acknowledgement and a celebration of the beauty and courage of being a woman". In her poetry there is a conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male-oriented universe. Kamala Das expresses her need for love from many angles with openness quite unusual in Indian literary works. Her feminine sensibility finds its expression in her attitude towards love, in the ecstatic joy that overwhelms her in being the recipient of it and the humiliating frustration she feels when denied. Srinivas Iyenger is of the view that "Kamala Das is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an intensive, largely man-made world."

Works Cited

- Das, Kamala. *My Story*. Sterling Publishers, 1988.
- Das, Kamala. *Old Playhouse and Other Poems*. Orient Longman, 2012.
- Das, Kamala. *Summer in Calcutta*. D C Books, 2004.
- Das, Kamala. *The Descendants*. Writers Workshop, 1973.
- Manohar, D. Murali. *Kamala Das: Treatment of Love in Her Poetry*. JIWE Publications, 1999.

R., Srinivasa Iyengar K. *Indian Writing in English*. Sterling Publishers, 2003.

Raveendran, P. P. *Kamala Das*. Sahitya Akademi, 2017.

Trivedi, Harish, and Devindra Kohli. *Heritage of English: an Anthology of Verse and Prose*.
Macmillan Co. of India, 1980.