The Confessional Mode in Kamala Das’ Poetry

Shabnam Parveen
(Ph.D scholar)
North Orissa University, Baripada, Mayurbhanj, Odisha, 757003

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ABSTRACT
The findings of this research article entitled “The Confessional Mode in Kamala Das’ Poetry: A Study” are based on Kamala Das’ frank and bold expression of personal life and experiences. There are autobiographical elements in all her works which are the mirror of her life especially in matters-matrimonial and sexual. She writes in the confessional mode which is walking on the razor’s edge. Most of the poems of Kamala Das are candidly confessional, terrifyingly authentic and exclusively an articulate voice of a feminine sensibility. Most of the poems are expressive of her craving for love. Emotional disintegration in marital relationship, disillusionment, frustrations and failures in a male dominated world are the basic theme of her poetry. In her poetry Kamala Das has always dealt with private humiliation and sufferings. Her own suffering and her own agony become symbolic of human predicament. An indepth study of her poems reveals her predilection for self-scrutiny and a tone of utter sincerity. Kamala Das’ voice is the voice of new liberated Indian women. The purpose of this research article is to focus the position, right and value of woman in male dominated society. It also deals with the problems woman face in the present world. Further psychoanalytical, biographical, and ontological methods have been adopted.

Keywords: Love, Marriage, Sexual humiliation, Emotion, Woman, Male domination.

Kamala Das, the pseudonym of Madhavi Kutty who changed her name to Kamala Suraiyya after being converted to Islam in 1995, is one of the celebrities in the field of Indian English poetry. Born on 31st March 1934 in Malabar, Kerala and married at an early age of 15, she studied mainly at home. Her husband believed in sex as matter of routine and inconsequence she had to be deprived of the pleasure of sex. She considered sex an emotional and spiritual bond. But her husband’s apathy or coldness in this matter led to her emotional starvation. It is this attitudinal incompatibility which was the prime cause of her unhappiness in conjugal life. As she cherished the notion of free sex, she changed her love one after another. But sexual satisfaction still remained unattainable to her. However, poetry was in her blood because both her mother and grandfather were poets in Malayalam. She started writing poetry while at school, but before contributing to Indian poetry in English, she had won laurels as a Malayalam writer. A bilingual writer, she preferred to write poetry in English and fiction in Malayalam. In recognition of her merit as a creative artist she was given the Asian Poetry Award in 1963, the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1969 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1984. Her first volume, ‘Summer in Calcutta’, appeared in 1965 and ‘The Old Playhouse and Other Poems’, published in 1973, brought her wide popularity and recognition. There is an autobiographical element in all her works which can be described as the mirror of her life especially in matters matrimonial and sexual.

Kamala Das is essentially known for her bold and frank expression. An acute obsession with love and the use of the confessional mode are the prominent features of her poetry. Albert Mordel opines that “works of the imagination open up to the reader hidden vistas in man’s inner life just as dreams do”. In Kamala Das this opening of the hidden vistas forms the matrix of her entire poetry. She writes in the confessional mode which is walking on the razor’s edge. The poets in this cast may be lured towards callow hysterics or terrifying mysticism. Kamala Das is free from either. Her poetry has often been considered as a gimmick in sex or striptease in words, an over-exposure of body or ‘snippets of trivia’. But the truth is that her poetry is an autobiography, an articulate voice of her ethnic identity, her Dravidian culture. In her, the poet is the poetry fully obliterating Eliot’s distinction between the man suffering and the mind creating. A poet’s raw material”, she says “is not stone or clay: it is her personality. I could not escape from my predicament even for a moment”. Her poetry has striking affinities with that of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Judith Wright. Her poetic corpus configures an inner voyage, an awareness beyond skin’s lazy hungers to the hidden soul. It enacts her quest, an exploration in to her self and seeking of her identity.

Kamala Das’ poetic output is slender, for it consists of only three volumes. But most of the poems included in them are expressive of her craving for love, emotional disintegration in marital relationship, disillusionments, frustrations and failures in a male-dominated world. The poet’s individual self feels suffocated and longs for a fresh lease of life. That is the reason why she registers her protest against
patriarchy in order to assert her individuality and feminine identity she herself says: "I must let my mind striptease/I must exude autobiography". In her poems, she expresses her need for love with a frankness and openness unusual in the Indian context. What is over powering is their sense of urgency. According to R.Parthasarathy, "Kamala Das' poem such as 'The Old Playhouse', 'The Looking Glass', and 'The Freaks' literally boil over." In 'Substitute' she tells us rather cynically what her experience of love turn out to be: "After love became a swivel-door, when one went out, another come in". The despair is infectious. Few of her poems have, in fact, escaped it. The poem entitled 'An Introduction' which begins with the dilemma of language ends with an assertion of identity. It explores the crust of the poet's self, who is an individual woman and also, in many ways, an everywoman. It is candidly confessional, terrifyingly authentic, an exclusively an articulate voice of the feminine sensibility. 'The Freaks' is also a confessional poem where the speaking female voice unburdens the tortures of her heart. In this poem the focus is on lack of human communication, the failure of man-woman relationship. The married couple are presented as having lived together for long but like islands unto themselves. While they intend or pretend to make love, their minds wander. What she grudges more is the man's shallowness, his physical hunger, his lip-love. He could never cross skin's surface; the hearts never met. Her heart remained an empty cistern. Her flamboyant lust is a defence-mechanism rather than her inner urge. 'Composition' is a poetic autobiography: a candidly confessional, terrifyingly authentic poem on innocence and experience, freedom and bondage, virginity and betrayal, sex and soul, involvement and indifference. 'The Old Playhouse" is comprised of three units. The first is an address of a female voice to her male counterpart. It spells out her story from freedom to captivity, a girl dwindling into a wife. The second enumerates her diurnal duties as a wife, her becoming a dwarf under the inflated male ego. It also highlights the loss of her naturalness in the artificial context. The third unit etches out her present plight of despondency and solitude. The image of a swallow oblivious of her home and instinctive urge to fly at large reflects most transparently the girl's loss of freedom and identity. The image of mind as an old playhouse with all its lights put out serves as a befitting caption to the poem and also mirrors, like a crystal, the psychic darkness of the woman. 'The Dance of the Eunuchs' is one the finest poems composed by Kamala Das. It has an autobiographical tone and brings out the poets sympathy for the eunuchs dancing in the scorching heat of the sun and giving vent to their pent –up grief in the songs they sing. The costumes, the makeup, the passion with which they dance are suggestive of female delicacy. The outward appearance and joy of the eunuchs is contrasted with their inward sadness. With their fractured personality they cannot even dream of happiness. The background of thundering clouds, flashes of lightening and meagre rainfall suggest their outward sparkle and inner rottleness. In 'A Request' we find the poet overwhelmed with the 'smouldering secrets' that she is so alone- that her life is a colourless design of crumbling patterns. The meaninglessness of the poet's life is sourly conveyed in such poems as 'Shoutout that Moon' and 'Neutral Tones'. The negation of all positive things reminds us of Hardy.

Kamala Das has been called a poet in the confessional mode. The confessional poets deal in their poetry with personal, emotional experiences which are generally taboo. As we make an in depth study of her poems we don't fail to notice her predilection for self-scrutiny and a tone of utter sincerity. The facts embodied in her poem are not always real, but there is no distraction at all from emotional truth what a confessional poet gives us is the physical equivalent for his or her mental state and it is such equivalent that we usually come across or get in the poetry of Kamala Das and in this respect she stands comparison with such confessional poet as Robert Lowell, Roethke, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Berryman, Judith Wright and others. In her poetry Kamala Das has always dealt with private humiliation and sufferings which are the stock themes of confessional poetry. The crucial factor in all confessional poetry is a matter of tone. The free verse of Kamala Das, by carefully avoiding all cliches of expression, has perfected a way of treating the most intimate experience without ever being sentimental or having any trace of pathos. Kamala Das' voice is the voice of new liberated Indian women. Her realistic treatment of private life has nothing exceptional about it. It is in conformity with the nature of confessional poetry.

Her repeated references to her Nair heritage of confessional Dravidian scheme are part of a persistent attempt to define her identity. As creator a personal mythology redefining one's identity forms a major concern of the confessional poet. Kamala Das' pre-occupation with self is so conspicuous that it cannot be glossed over. Sexual humiliation becomes a central experience in her autobiography 'My Story' in which she says: 'In the orbit of illicit sex there seemed to be only crudeness and violence', 'The Old Playhouse' is a variation on the same theme "You dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured/ Yourself into every nook and cranny you embalmed/ My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices' all her quests for love end in disaster of lust. The sterility and the vacant ecstasy that accompany the dance of the eunuch correspond to her own feelings of persecution and inadequacy which live in her as a continuous stage of
personal crisis. The image of the body as a prison which recurs in her poems may be traced to this deep existential anxiety that pervades all confessional poetry.

The confessional poet makes a sincere effort to relate his or her private experiences with the outer world as it is. The struggle involved in this case is evident in the poems of Kamala Das for a very early stage. In 'An Introduction' she strives to keep her identity against 'the categorisers' who ask her to 'fit in' having refused to choose a name and a role she feels it necessary to define her identity. The painful assertion, "I too call myself I", comes from the predicament of the confessional poet. Her experiences are common and ordinary, in fact too common to give her any special identity but the personal pronoun "I" which experiences them, she insists, is separate and unique. This, to her, is the only way to retain her sense of personal worth in the world of categorisers. She sees the outer world as hostile to the world of the self. This hostility is poetised in 'The Suicide' which carries the most vital elements of confessional poetry. Here the conflict is between the world without and the world within. The poem just mentioned is a monologue addressed to the sea. Since the poet cannot disinherit either the body or the soul and live with one of them, the climax of the poem is reached in the ideas of suicide where the agency which can take away one of them is the sea, an old symbol of timelessness. The poet thinks of resorting to suicidal means because of her inability to synthesize the inner and outer i.e. the soul and the body.

To Kamala Das, death has none of the charms of a mystic experience. She considers death desirable because she thinks that life cannot be redeemed. The escapes she seeks in physical love are also suicide in the sense that they can affect a temporary margin of the dualities within oneself in 'The Suicide' swimming symbolises such a temporary resolution of tension. Confessional poets quote death and disintegration so as to reach a higher level of perception. They long for death and disintegration as well as for physical wholeness and insights. This tension between Contraries is reflected in the constantly shifting moods of confessional poetry. The moods of a confessional poet are diverse and constantly shifting. Kamala Das' poem composition bears it out. A confessional poet deliver deliberately refrains from idealizing or glorifying any past of the cell. The same strategy may be noted in 'Blood' where there is an intermingling of self-queries and self-assertions. Images of deep involvement in the physical act of love are followed by those of physical rotting, disgust and sickness in poems like 'The Old Playhouse', 'In Love' and 'Gino'. An extreme point is reached in 'Loud Posters' where she mistrusts the medium of poetry and laments its artificiality.

Confessional poetry is all autobiographical. It is rooted in the personal experiences of the poet. In his Impersonal Theory of Poetry which is considered a milestone in the history of English Library Criticism. Eliot laid emphasis on the point that a poet has not a personality to express but a medium which is only a medium and not a personality. But confessional poetry is intensely personal. However, a great confessional poet, like Kamala Das, achieves impersonality in another way. From the personal and the particular, she rises to the general and the universal. Her ability to universalize her personal experience does not evade our attention as we go through her poetical works. Her own suffering and her own agony become symbolic of human predicament and suffering. Herein lies Kamala Das' pre-eminence as an artist she is both intensely personal and universal.

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