

In Search of Another “I” in the Poetry of Kamala Das

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Abstract

I want to say no more of Kamala Das or Kamala Suraiyya, the famous Indian poetess, rather I want to discover an ordinary woman's ordinary ways of living and wishing of a life, delving deep into this Indian poetess; and observe the journey of her poetic soul from the east to the west, vibrating the pulse of another American poetess of her time. This is to show how a woman is every woman whether it is east or west; Kamala Das is any Kamala as she expresses herself in her writings, thereby echoing the feelings of the poetess in the west. It is also to show that no geographical horizon can actually part away two women, as all women share a common worldly platform. My next point of discussion would be a brief introduction to the poetic trend of the time of Kamala Das and how she differs with the others. In this regard a comparison would be observed with Mamta Kalia and Imtiaz Dharker from a feminist angle. Finally a comparative study would be presented between Kamala Das and the American poetess; in search of the another “I”, the other woman waiting for a drop of love to quench her thirst over the seas.

Key words: Poetry, Kamala Das, inner “I” Sylvia plath, Mamta Kalia, Imtiaz Dharker

It was a starry night. Little Maina was listening to the tales from epics. Suddenly she noticed Sita starring at her, then appeared Radha, and then Draupadi... “Do you know who you are?” – they asked her. “I am a girl and my name is Maina.” “No! You are only a bird, a taking – bird, Maina, who can never fly”.... Maina opened her eyes with a shudder and shouted her lungs-out... Granny sleeping beside her woke up and tried to cool her saying, “It was dream Maina and nothing else. Now you don't shout so loud dear, you are a girl you know!”- Yes, if I know that I am a girl, I ‘must’ know those that a boy may not know. If we know that we are girls we should know the ‘do’s and the ‘do not’s. This lesson is sown in us at very germinating season and with as grows the knowledge of discrimination between a man and a “wo-man”. Accordingly we learn to realize to what extent a woman should open-up; we learn how to talk softly, walk slowly, dress-up for our men, to remain “in-door’ and ‘fit-in’. In this way we keep on with the tradition of adding brick after brick to the pillar of our false heritage, since the time of myth, thus establishing a truth out of a false everyday.

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The essentially basic contemporary trend of literature in India and abroad as I personally believe, is to discover the essence of revelation that in the quest for the inner "I", diving deep into one-half and defining the experience coming not in words and expressions. However, this freedom of expression, was not or rather still not so very unrestrictedly permitted to the women, to some who are not men. They should maintain life beyond the veil and so can never open-up through pen or else they should be in pains. This very un-extinguished agony of women "I"s rattle at my heart as it is also a heart of a contemporary woman.

However, all the girls do not become a tamed swallow and repeat the drudgery of their fore-mothers. Society, frowns at their "female" boldness and very often strongly accuses them. But they keep on searching for a room of their own, desperately enough to stretch for a sun beam and reach out for a star, beyond the horizon of the confined life between kitchen and cradle, in order to discover the inner "I" within themselves. Such an exceptional spirit was Kamala Suraiyya Das. Born in Malabar, India, in the year 1934, 31st March, Kamala introduces herself in her poem, **An Introduction** ;-

"I am an Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one ..."

Very boldly she declares her emotions, desires, cravings and anguish in her works and without a single hesitation, she says in the **Composition**.

"

By peeling off my layers
I reach closer to the soul", ... and in this way she unfurls like the petals of
a flower;

"I shall some day leave, leave the cocoon
You built around me..... I shall some day take
Wings, fly around, as often petals do when
Free in air". (I Shall Some Day)

Women have been writing in India since 1000 B.C. Apala, Jana Bai, Bhava Devi are known to us, in this regard. Since their time till now history has witnessed various women writers though most of them did not come in light. The late nineteenth century observed certain women personalities like Mukta Bai, Janabai Shinde, Begum Rokeya, Pandita Ramabai and establishment of different organizations like Womens' Indian Association(1917), Stree Seva Mandal (1910), National Women's Organisation(1920), National Council for Indian Women(1925) and others. Yet 'Bangabasi' journal, deem Kadambini Ganguly, one of the first women doctors, a whore. It is because society fails to portray any other picture of a 'good' woman other than the one of the whom might say, - "She sacrificed herself daily... she was so

constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own.” (A Room of One’s Own: Virginia Woolf’ 1929). If this ‘she’ ever voices for right or even dares to express her honest feelings, even to day the society puts a scar on her. But, Kamala Das refuses to be a doll of the ‘old play house’. She rocks at the self awareness and esteem of a woman saying :-

“Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried beneath

a man ?...” (**The Conflagration**) .. and rises out of the ashes to become an “every woman”, who craves for dignity and love. In **Vrindaban**, she thus mentions ; - “Vrindaban live on in every woman’s mind”, Here she becomes every Radha of every women and evokes the yearnings of their “I”s –

“ ... I am every
Woman who seeks love...
... I am sinner,
I am saint.
I am the beloved and the
Betrayed”.

“I have no joys which not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I”. (An Introduction)

The voice of such another “I”, is heard from the west one contemporary of Kamala Das, born in the year 1932, 27th October, in America.

“Hear the crickets chirping
In the dewy grass
Bright little fireflies’
Twinkle as they pass
I thought that I could not be hurt,
Tragic vision of life.
Silver web of happiness”....(Sylvia Plath)

These lines were written by an eight and a half years old girl who thought that she “could not be hurt”, but the “tragic vision of life” had splitted the “Silver web of happiness” of her life when she like “very brown”, “Indian” Kamala, urged to voice her desperate cravings and deep-seated agonies. Whenever she had been challenged for her ‘open’ expressions, she declared –

“I write only because
There is voice within me...”
She further says “Out of ashes / I rise,” (Lady Lazarus: Sylvia Plath)

“... the woman I am stretching to be is one whom no man can send crying out of life”. (Expression of Plath in an entry)

Like Kamala Das, this “I” of the west writes in her diary ;-

“I would like to be every one, a cripple, a dying man, a whore, and then come back as that person”. She also quests for the “I” in every woman and relates her “I” with them. Like Kamala this “I” too refuses to ‘fit in’ in a ‘black shoe’ or be “beneath” a “Mein Kampf”, her “daddy” or dear husband, Ted Hughes. Yes, this another “I” of Kamala Das is Sylvia Plath, who too quests like her for the inner “I” within herself and in every woman who urges to break-free and voice out the “I”s within them like Kamala or like Sylvia.

To discover the inner “I” and evoke its earnestly honest desires openly had been the pulse of modern literary motif. But, women, who are not ‘men’ were always beyond the veils when the art of pen was concerned. In the twenty first century also society cannot actually accept licentious expressions from women very specifically. They are always curbed in life and curtailed in the field of art only because they are ‘woman’, the ‘second sex’. Whether it is east or west women are women, someone ‘other’. The one who remains beyond the veil blushes as ‘good’ lady, and who do not is always ‘bad’.

So, fairytales never change. The kings keep on marrying till they have a male child and ‘good’ princesses get married to a single prince. This disobedient princesses face an ill-luck. Yet, Sitas and Draupadis emerge out of myth into reality and all Kamalas and all Sylvias keep on writing, writing, writing, paving the path for other such literary off-springs like Mamata Kalia, Imtiaz Dharker, Smita Agarwal, Tara Patel, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, Mallika Sengupta, and you and I, The inner “I” might say ; -

“Yes, Lady I’m like you,
I have a child or two”.
I must act the role of happy woman, happy wife” (Plath)
Yet, - “Out of ashes
I rise” (Plath)
“...I shall some day take,
Wings, fly around”. (Kamala Das)

“Why not let me speak in
Any language I like ? The language
Becomes mine, mine alone”. (Kamala Das)
“I write only because
There is a voice within me
That will not be still.” (Sylvia Plath)

These lines are actually a fusion of various poetic expressions of Plath and Das. However, when read together it might give an impression of unity of two selves, two “I”s of two women, beating in the same pulse and echoing the cravings of “I”s of the women of the East and the West, of all yesterdays, today and tomorrows – This is just an attempt to evoke this every contemporary truth.

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